

# LABYRINTH



Cover Photo: First Noble Truth by Cameron Enes

The Writers Project and Labyrinth staff  
would like to extend our sincere thanks to:

The CSM Honors Project faculty, staff, and students, with special thanks to David Laderman, for their continued support of our club and our vision,  
our inspiring club advisors, Sarah Mangin and Keira Travis,  
and the students who submitted their work to be considered for this publication.

We want to thank you for reading our new issue of Labyrinth and hope that this publication continues to inspire you.

Keep writing. Keep learning. Keep creating.



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# Letter from the Editor

This edition has been an absolute joy to work on, as our team grew this semester. Publications like *Labyrinth* bring student voices to life, and I believe that student and youth voices are among the most significant ones that people should be listening to. As of May 2024, students nationwide are using their voices to call attention to the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Over 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, the majority of whom are women and children. Many more will be killed if we, as a people, do not take action. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the United States has sent \$300 billion in economic and military assistance; American tax dollars are funding a genocide. This is not normal. Hailing from the Philippines—a land that was colonized for 300 years by the Spanish and later imperialized by the United States—I come from a colonized background similar to that of Palestinians, do not have a homeland to return to. I would be disrespecting myself and my ancestors if I did not use my own voice to speak out on this issue. Palestinian liberation is connected to my people's liberation, and it is connected to yours. I urge you to use your own voice to protest and to call your local elected officials, demanding a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

We, as human beings, should not turn a blind eye to the mass slaughter of people. MAKE NOISE.

*I dedicate this issue to the oppressed and colonized,  
yearning and dreaming of liberation, a decolonized world.*

*I dedicate this issue to my ancestors and islands.*

*I dedicate this issue to a Free Palestine, Free Philipphines,  
Free Congo, and Free Turtle Island.*

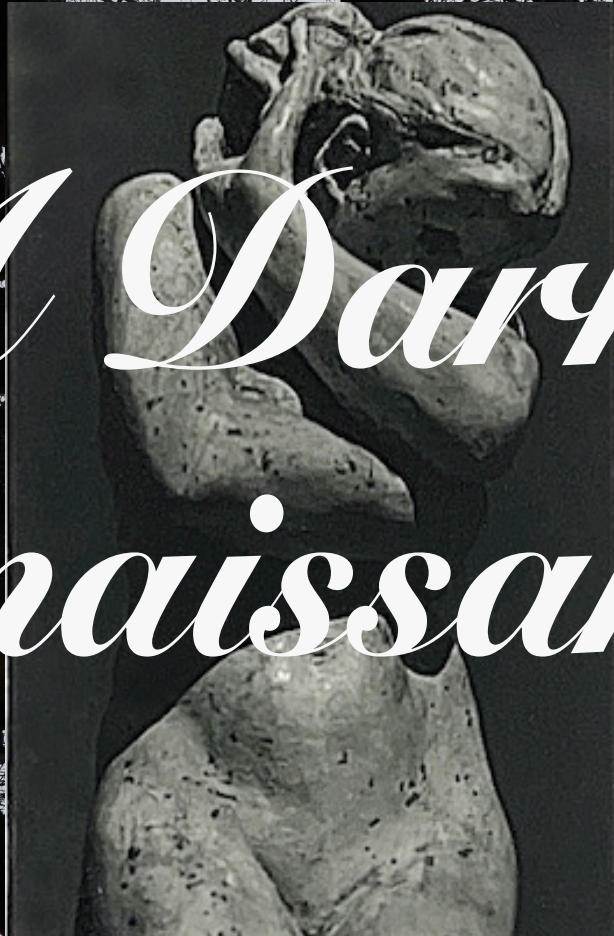
In community and always in solidarity,  
Aki Malig Dayag

"When we revolt it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, **we can no longer breathe.**"

-Frantz Fanon

PHOTO: Ancestry  
by Renata Caliman

PHOTO: Maiden  
by Samantha  
Laporga



# *A Dark Renaissance*

# The Crow's Cry

CORDIVAE LUZ DULCEY

Once upon a time, I was cursed. Once upon a time, they were cursed. Once upon a time, we forged the closest of bonds.

The events leading to my curse matter not, nor do the ones leading to theirs. The only thing that does matter is that, at different points in time, we had both been turned—against our wills—into crows.

I lamented my transformation; the rest of my life would be a mere few years and I would never again be able to enjoy the various luxuries of life as a human. Never again would I be able to tend to my garden, never again would I enjoy the bittersweet taste of a warm cup of chocolate, never again would I be able to take a relaxing swim in the lake near my former house. Never again would I have a house.

Eventually, whether by necessity or simply growing used to my new form, I learned to enjoy the simple pleasures of life as a corvid. I ate berries off bushes and I stole food from those stupid enough to turn their gaze elsewhere while in my presence. And of course, I learned to fly. I soared through the sky on currents of wind. I perched in the highest points of the city and felt no fear when I looked down. The simplicity of a bird's life had grown on me; it seemed almost preferable to the complex and painful life of a human.

Still, I felt as if I was missing something. A certain connection was lacking that I so desperately craved.

I wanted companionship. The other crows served as satisfactory company for a while, but their intelligence paled in comparison to mine. Humans, on the other hand, were entirely out of the question; I could either pretend to be a natural-born crow and be treated as nothing more than a lowly pet, or I could reveal my cursed nature and scare them off or, gods forbid, I could even be hunted.

The loneliness was growing, an ever-expanding pit in my avian torso gnawing at me constantly. The only way I could vent my frustrations was to fly to the highest point I could find—the top of a lonely tower near the city's center—and caw vainly into the air, hoping that someone would hear my cry and come, but knowing no one ever would.

Thank the gods that I was wrong.

I had spent an entire year in solitude since my transformation by then. I had just finished cawing into the wind that day, when I spotted them soaring through the air straight towards me. There was something odd about their movements; they reminded me of someone. It then struck me: they moved with the same mannerisms I had a whole year ago, the mannerisms of a freshly turned crow. My breast swelled with hope. Would I at last meet someone like me? Someone I

could truly connect with, that could connect with me like no one else ever would be able to?

They perched next to me, keeping a fair distance. They were cautious, as I once was. I spoke—something I was extremely grateful crows could do—for the first time in months: “Were you... turned... as well?” They stepped back in surprise for a tick before opening their beak in an attempt to replicate my action, but half a caw came out in the stead of words. They were about to try again, but they quickly gave up and nodded instead.

Oh! The happiness that flowed through me upon seeing that simple gesture! Never had I been more grateful to see a mere nod than in that moment. In my ecstasy I jumped forward, startling the new bird. I quickly apologized, and began excitedly talking with them. The conversation was less than fruitful owing to their lack of speech, but I was satisfied nonetheless. I told them to follow me, that I would teach them how to live this new life. I would show them the best places to go foraging, I would teach them the most efficient ways to fly, and I would of course instruct them on how to speak. Seeing no other option, they decided to take the leap of faith and placed their trust in me.

The next year went by quickly. They had learned to speak, and I had managed to glean various nuggets of information from them: their name was Alex, they were cursed less than a month before meeting me, and—most importantly—they had decided to stay with me.

We had so much fun in the years after, enough to last us a lifetime—several, in terms of crow lifespans. We turned our shared curse into a blessing, and through it formed a bond closer than I even knew possible. We flew together, we cawed together, we foraged together, we stole together, and we grew old together.

We died together.

We had spent about seven years together, which is a decent number for a crow, and neither of us had expected one of our usual targets—an old man and his equally old wife running a bakery together—to adopt a cat. By the time we saw the orange blur of fur barreling towards us, we knew there was no escape. Instead of the flood of adrenaline I had been expecting, a wave of calm washed over me, and looking over to Alex, I saw in their eyes that the same

was true for them. We had no regrets. We accepted our fate. The cat slammed into us with its claws bared, and I drew my last breath.

Then I drew another. And another. And yet another, until I realized that I was somehow still alive. I looked down, but where I expected to see talons I instead saw feet. *Human* feet.

The curse had been broken. I was... conflicted, to say the least. Could I truly return to life as a human? Would I never again be able to soar? A pool of dread began to form in my gut as I asked myself yet another question: would I be able to live on without Alex?

I fortunately never had to learn the answer to that question.

I looked to my left where Alex the dead crow was supposed to be, and instead saw Alex the very much alive human. While their face was foreign to me, their eyes were unmistakably theirs, and in them I saw recognition as they looked into my own eyes and drew the same conclusions.

We stared at each other in shock. The cat had run away by now, startled by our sudden transformation. I spoke using my tongue for the first time in nearly a decade: "Are we...?" Alex shakily nodded. A wave of some feeling I cannot name—or was it multiple?—rushed through my body. I held Alex in a tight embrace and began to sob. They did the same.

We both had no idea what to do now, but we were happy nonetheless to merely still be together. I stood up on wobbly legs and took a breath deeper than any I had taken in years. I scanned our surroundings as I regained my composure and noticed something that piqued my interest. The bakery had a "help wanted" poster on its window. I gave Alex a joyous look and smiled before finally saying,

"I think... I think I know what we're going to do."







PHOTO: Prince, Pescadero by Jennie Hwang Loft

# The Duke Is An Incredible Man

*SONIA RILEY*

The Duke is an incredible man. Each morning he puts on his shining armor with the help of his assistant squire, Dave. The pair wax and shine each crevice of the armor making it sparkle in the sunlight that falls not the antechamber room. The stones are marble and veins of ice run through their porous skin, it gives quite the dazzling effect, leaving visitors awestruck and wondering, where could those have come from. The Duke does not know.

Once the armor is finished and the body is properly weighted and protected the Duke flies out to the large chamber hall, his clinking footsteps light like a ballerina, waltzing on pointed toes, striding towards the gilded lily chair that has mahogany carvings of bears and seals, wolves and lions. Next to him rests a three legged stool that wobbles a bit on the flagstone floor. The Duke loves this table, it was a gift from his mother. On the table he sets three rabbits paws attached to his large golden key that opens the secret desk of riddles. In this desk lies the riddle necessary for each person to answer their most ardent questions; does he love me, will I die, what am I here for, who is the sky?

One by one the Searchers arrive and stand in line outside the chamber hall. Few of them talk with each other. They were cloth coverings and dirty shoes. Some come from great distances and have hardly anything at all. None of them bring offerings, they themselves are such. They clutch tight to

their questions, holding them close to their heart, scared that if they let them fall they will be further away from learning who they are.

Dave invites each one in, with a nod of his hairy head and a grin. He wears great flowing leather boots that rise up to his knees and spill out with fluff and frill into his yellow silk pants that are tight around his thighs and buttocks. His yellow shirt is open at the chest and underneath is a sheer white linen top. Chest hairs poke from the holes of the top and run up his chest to meet his smooth pointed beard. A curly mustache sits poignantly poised above his small upper lip and his devil green eyes reek of mischief. The pair walk together, silently, to the foot of the chair, where the Duke sits waiting with not an ounce of impatience. The searcher need only look to the Duke to convey their question and the Duke swiftly strikes out to the desk, key in hand, rabbit paws dangling over his dainty wrist. The desk recoils and huffs and out of its secret compartment shoots a small parchment. The Duke looks over it longingly, not hesitating nor rushing. He smooths out the papyrus paper on his metal thigh and looks up to catch the eye of his cat Vivian. A small black and white cat, she is mottled and slinky, curiously exploring every nook of the hall.

The searcher looks nervous, wondering what is inside that metal and why does he wear it inside, but they

dare not impose upon him in fear he may not share their riddle. When the riddle is deemed sufficient it is handed to Dave who ushers the searcher out a small rounded wooden side door, the metal that bars its wooden slats creaking at the urge of it opening. The searcher reenters the world, blinded by light, for the chamber hall is relatively dark, save for a single stained glass window above the head of the Duke.

The Duke does this all day pulling riddles out for each searcher that asks, until at the end of the day there are no searchers, at last. Upon Dave's signal the Duke rises, Vivian at his side, and returns to the antechamber to take off his heavy metal armor. Underneath is a very strong, healthy body save for a single large pulsing red scar that runs from the

left side of his neck streaking down into his cloth covering underneath his right boob and across his back ending at a small 'x' across his spinal column.

Dave serves the Duke a simple meal of bread and stew before leaving to his own small room that has but a cot, a closet, and a single lamp. The Duke eats his meal by candlelight at a wooden table, sitting on a wooden stool. He eats slowly, trancelike, washing away his day with the pleasurable warmth sliding into his stomach. He washes his face in the wash bin, rubbing three times around his eyes and climbs into bed. He blows out the candle from his straw cot. In the dark he cries, long sobs of hot tears that pulse from the point in his stomach and burn through the

scar on his back.

The Duke wonders, when will he find his riddle, when will he know who he is, when will he be able to rejoin the world armor-less. The Duke sleeps and the Duke dreams of himself, dancing down a long hallway, faces rushing past, places pulling him along faster and faster streaming towards the light at the end of the hall. The Duke wakes up and forgets it all, pulling on his armor to heed the call of the Searcher.

# Not a Sunflower

by Rubi

A sunflower standing out—  
In a field of roses—  
Is how I'd describe you—  
As my heart proposes.

Oh, to be the sun—  
And to acquire your gaze.  
All of existence I shall see—  
Yet a mere sunflower—to leave me dazed

A sunflower—you are not—  
But a mere person and then none.  
Even so—as you walk by,  
Sunflowers tend to face you instead of the sun.

A glimpse as I walk by—  
Learn my existence is cruel.  
Another's shine has you entranced—  
As for you—I, a fool.

A shot at my heart and soul—  
A shot right through.  
Yet I'd enjoy breaking it—  
I'd enjoy breaking my heart for you.



# Sky Swings

JENNIE HWANG LOFT

# *Falling* CORDIVAE LUZ DULCEY

You know that feeling you get sometimes when you're asleep? That feeling of freefall? That sudden rush of adrenaline flowing through your veins like liquid shock? The involuntary jolt of your limbs as your perfect slumber is disturbed and you wake up in terror, only to realize that you were perfectly safe the whole time?

I get that feeling a lot.

Every night, when I go to sleep, I have the same dream. A forest stands before me, the shifting branches like hands beckoning me. Behind me is desolation, a barren and frozen wasteland full of a bitter, cold, and silent emptiness. The forest calls to me, the sweet chirping of the insects worming its way through my ears into my bones. There is a whisper under it, barely audible yet clear as day. It grows stronger than everything else, a powerful pull begging me in a language that doesn't exist. My brain twists and contorts around the foreign noise, the sickening pain of its stretching in my skull almost enough to wake me, but before it does, I understand. It wants me to find it.

I walk into the woods, though I soon find myself sprinting. I do not remember when I started moving, but I do not care. I need to find the source of the voice. I do not know why, I do not understand, but it doesn't matter. I will understand everything once I find the voice. I must find it.

I'm getting closer. My legs sting from the scratches of discarded branches. There are dull pains from the bruises made by the rocks I nearly stumble on. The chirping of the bugs and the rustling of leaves in the wind has long since faded. It's almost completely silent now. Silent, save for one thing. My ears are bleeding from the intensifying yet steady sound. The warm fluid drips down to my neck, but I do not mind. I'm almost there. I can nearly touch the voice. I reach out.

The ground splits open beneath my feet.

I wake up, adrenaline surging through every vein and artery. My last memory is of the voice. It cries out as I fall, in what sounds like despair. I have failed it. The sadness is a weight, nearly crushing me. Will I ever reach it? Will I ever behold its beauty?

Night after night, dream after dream, I try to finally reach the source of that gorgeous calling, seemingly in vain. I do not know what stops me. Is it God? The Devil? My own fear?

I spend most of my waking moments researching methods I can use to improve my sleep. Things like friends and careers no longer matter to me, so I cast them aside. I try lucid dreaming, rituals, and all sorts of teas and concoctions. I am getting closer, I even brush up against it, but it still isn't enough. I still cannot see it.

I wake up in a cold sweat. How many attempts have I made now? I almost begin to despair, but something is different this time. I look around, and I realize that I am truly seeing. I get up and walk to my mirror in wonder. My eyes look so much older than me—ancient, even—and more lively than they have ever been. They are radiant, my irises a color I have never seen before.

A veil has been lifted. I see the true nature of everything around me, the horrifying reality of it all challenging my comprehension like nothing ever has before. As terrifying as it all is, I want to see it all. I want to know all. I have to.

I go for a walk, the first I have taken in a long time. My new eyes greedily drink every sight into my very soul. The trees are barren, the sun cold. I look at the branches, and they have a sharpness to them I hadn't previously noticed. Their very cells and the processes they run to stay alive are exposed to me. There is no language in existence that can fully explain the sheer truth I see.

And yet, there is still something behind it all, something I am beginning to see the shape of but is still far too large and hidden for me to even begin to comprehend. It isn't until I finally see other people that I truly understand why I am being shown this.

Their eyes are cold and dead. They lack the gift of beautiful and true vision I alone have been bestowed. In this moment I know what I must do. I have to share it with them. I have to make them see. I have to reach the voice, for only it can make them understand. I will never be able to convince them, for they are the cave dwellers and I am the only free person. I have seen the real world, but they will cling to the familiar shadows on their wall.

I go back to my apartment. Whatever it is that keeps me from reaching the end of my dream, it will not stop me tonight. Tonight I will find it. Tonight I will find the voice. I will find its source.

I am determined. Resolution fortifies me, my muscles tightening in anticipation. I take enough tranquilizers to down a horse and I lay down to sleep.

I go through the dream again. I follow the voice, and the ground splits for the last time.

I'm falling. Every fiber of my being is yelling at me, begging me to stop, to wake up, but it is futile.

I land on top of where the chasm opened, its mouth now sealed. A new hope is burning within me.

I dash forward. This is it. I've finally reached it.



I look at the source.

It's disgustingly beautiful. My eyes burn in searing pain as I look at it, but I refuse to turn my gaze. It reeks of filthy carrion and flowers on a spring morning, of coffee and arson. Looking at it sounds like a lifelong dream finally realized. Touching it, I taste knowledge. My very bones ache and every single hair on my body stands on end as a pure and roiling euphoric terror attacks every one of my cells. It is the light and it is the shadow. It is order and it is chaos. It reaches out to me with an arm that doesn't exist.

It embraces me.

Once again a veil is lifted, and I finally behold everything. Its plan, its desires are revealed to me, the information seemingly implanted into my own mind, sliding into place in the mass of slimy flesh that humans call a brain. It's so noble, so beautiful. My smile stretches from ear to ear, the muscles in my cheeks contracting more tightly than I thought possible. Hot tears flow freely down my face, the salt sweet on my tongue.

It's calling out now, calling out to whoever can hear. A terrifyingly pleasant cacophony of screeching and harmony and nails on chalkboards. It seeks others that will heed the call. Others that will help it fulfill its purpose. My own destiny is almost fulfilled.

I wake up for the final time, for once without the familiar despondence. I sit down at my computer. The whirring of fans and the steady clacking of keys begins to fill my otherwise silent apartment:

You know that feeling you get sometimes when you're asleep?

Can you hear it yet?

Please, heed its call. Follow the voice. Open your eyes.

Oh, and be careful when you fall.

# Love

Soledad Sandoval

It rocks back and forth,  
The small boat floats on the endless sea,  
which glitters and shines like gold.  
They leave soft kisses and whisper sweet nothings, but  
she does not respond.

Gentle waves turn into serpents, wrapping around her.  
Suffocating it in the depths of darkness.  
It wraps around my neck, and my lungs fill with tears  
and sorrow,  
Floating in the endless blue, their smooth scales hold  
me close.  
I can't escape; I feel the love again.

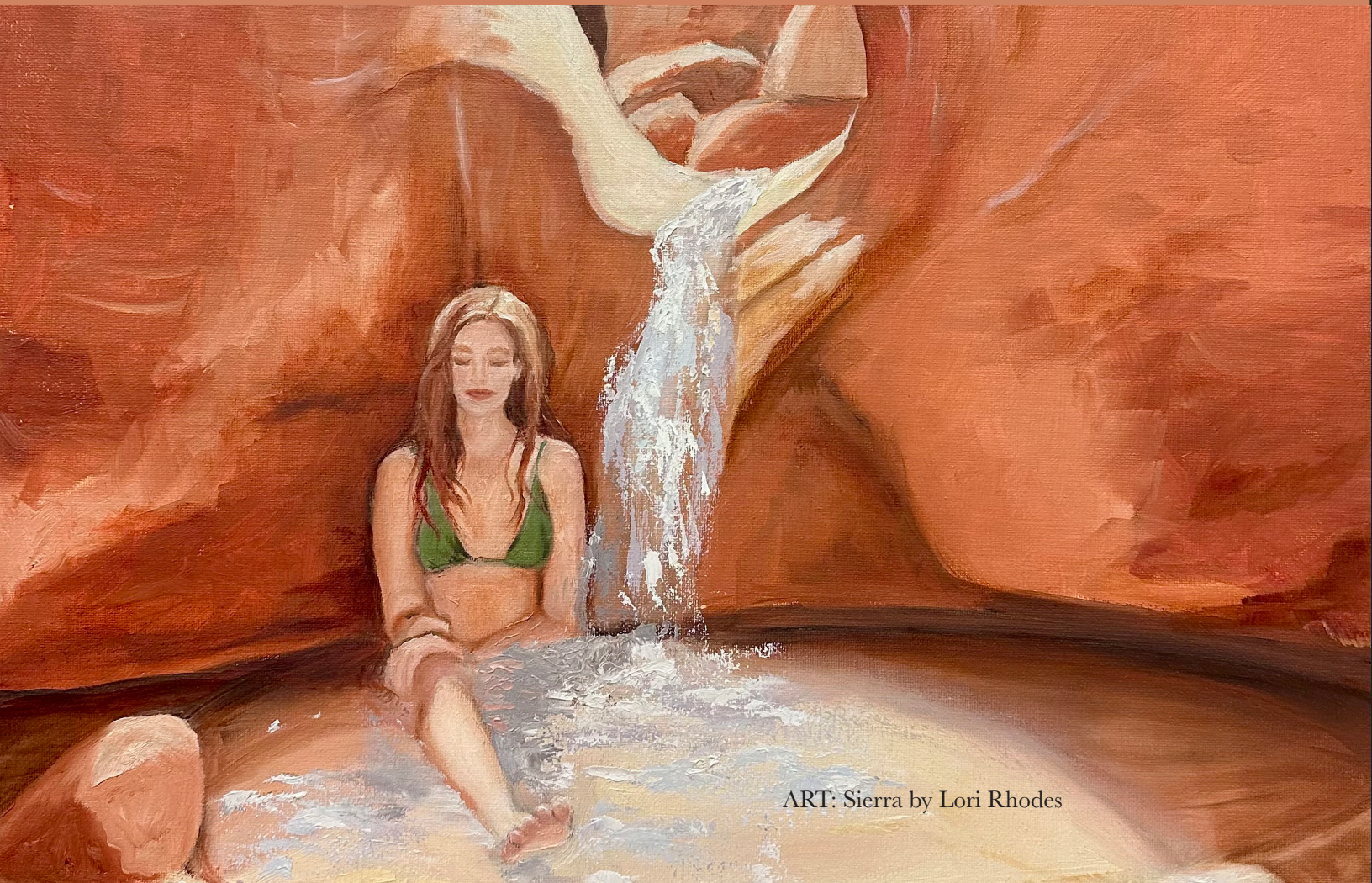
They call to me-Sinner! Sinner!  
I see them.  
They adore me, my slithery friends.  
Hiding in the darkness with golden slit eyes and purple-tipped fangs.  
Floating in a sea of pitch black, they call to me; they  
feel like home.

They sound like you; you who loves me, right?

Who speaks to me with red-stained teeth  
who holds me close, protecting me from security  
that is what love is, is it not?  
She pulls me out of the abyss you drag me into.  
She, a bee, buzzes and holds me tenderly.  
Unlike you, who plucks out my voice and drowns my sorrow out  
This is love! It has to be love!  
I am loved!

They try to pry me away, but she is mesmerizing.  
Her beautiful black eyes are like the vast universe  
Her small hands hold me gently; she kisses me with her  
small yellow and black fuzzy body, leading me to her haven.  
I walk away from them, from you, who scream in agony.

The sun caresses my back; she is proud.  
Instead of screaming, laughter fills the air.  
What is this feeling?  
The wind beckons me to view the vast green forest and  
life-filled hills.  
Who withstand the harsh winds and prevail in triumph,  
They invite me; this is love.



ART: Sierra by Lori Rhodes

# *The Long Winter*

Precious Mangubat

Oliver buys a dozen roses every twelve days and keeps them in a vase by a window in his home. Each day, he picks a rose from the dozen, trims away its keen thorns with his kitchen scissors, and holds it closely to his chest as he walks the long way to the college. If he leaves his house at sunrise, he makes it to the academy gates just in time as they open.

"You're a fool, Oliver," the students of the college poke fun at the heart-eyed boy standing by the gates with a rose in his hand, yet he is unphased and stands tall, a sheepish smile playing on his lips. His loafers are worn out from the daily marches, the once fine leather beginning to tear and shrivel from the overuse. Still, he never wears any other pair aside from his Sunday's best, as it goes with the black tie he loosely puts around his neck, one that he found for very little at the common market. "A fool, indeed."

He counts about three hundred seconds after he arrives at the school until he hears her feather-light voice drawing closer. Then, he stands a little straighter and glances at the rose once more until she is near enough that he can smell her expensive perfume. Though she walks with the same friends every day, their names are lost in his memory as only hers is precious enough to keep. Their eyes meet and Oliver's world slows down. He never tires of the autumn woods held in her gaze.

"Evangeline," the girls stop their conversations as the boy with a rose approaches. He holds out the flower and the girl meets him halfway, taking the rose delicately in her hold. He cannot deny his smile at the sight of her beauty. She is heaven-sent in his eyes.

"Have a wonderful day."

At those words, Evangeline shines but makes an effort to seem indifferent, only nodding politely before passing the boy. She looks back at him only once more before entering the academy, and his day is made. He watches her blonde head disappear into the building before he turns around and walks away. Every morning is the same for the season that passes. When it begins getting harder to sell newspapers, he turns to picking flowers he sees on his way. Evangeline takes them, whether they be a cluster of daffodils or a single dandelion.

But the winter comes and it gets cold.

Oliver finds the traversing impossible with the accompaniment of drowning snow reaching up to his knees. The boy falls ill and for the rest of the wintertime, he does not see Evangeline. The months are long and cold, his skin frozen to the touch as his shabby home provides no warmth. His mind is not spared as the bitterness trickles into his thoughts. He thinks of his flower girl who holds no promise of returning his heart.

Does Evangeline look for me? He wonders to himself. When the blizzards seep through his rundown ceiling, he breaks his own heart at the thought of Evangeline forgetting his flowers.

Maybe I am a fool, indeed. He stays inside for the rest of the frost, and when the sun peeks through his window where the empty vase sits he stays inside as well. His heart remains frozen even when the ice outside thaws and the flowers begin to bloom once more.

Only when there are three knocks does Oliver blink awake from his prison of thoughts. He rises and stalks to the door, his steps reminiscent of those heading to the college. With heavy hands, he opens the entry to gaze at nothing. He looks around until his eyes travel to his feet where a bouquet of dried roses awaits, dozens on dozens. A closer look and he sees familiar daffodils and dandelions. Bending down, Oliver takes the card attached to the flowers.

It reads: Spring is near. What blooms in your garden? -E

It is only then that Oliver looks up and sees the beauty of the after-winter.

# *Petunias*

Soledad Sandoval

No one in sight, nothing but tiny petunias.  
Colorful and gentle, they glare as I pass by.  
Hidden in thick bushes, they toss in turmoil,  
Struggling to bloom in the darkness.  
A murky, heavy fog surrounds us.

Treading carefully along the gloaming path,  
The wind carries the sickeningly sweet smell  
that drags into the abyss.  
The strangulating and mesmerizing scent  
drowns you as you struggle to escape.  
Yet they wave at you with the utmost elegance  
and grace with stained close petals.

The rhythm is alive; I feel it on my skin.  
But don't be afraid; the wind can do so much.  
And you'll escape with their arms spiraling

into the quiet night sky.  
As their golden sweet nectar stains the once-  
clean soil,

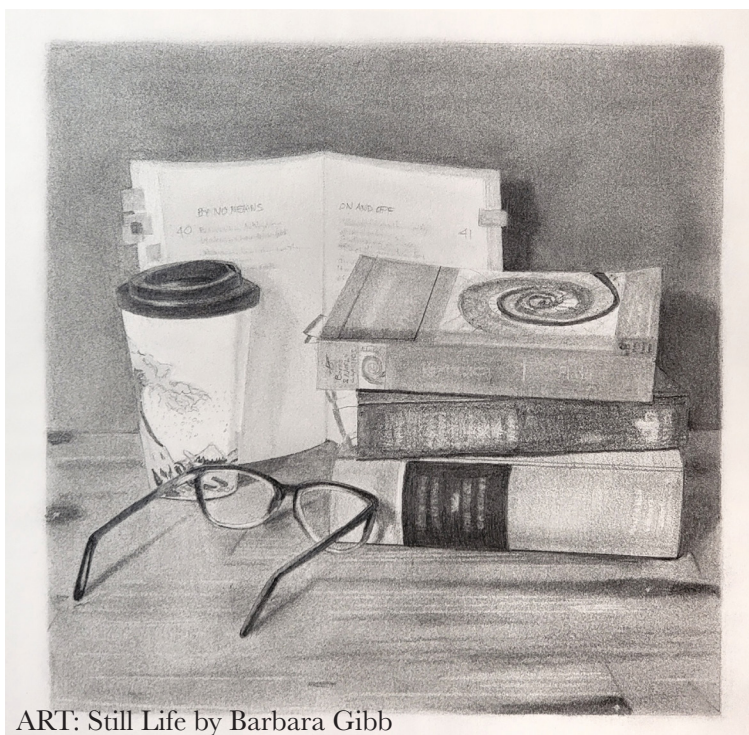
And as the rows of petunias end, they meet with  
the endless blue sea.  
Bathing in the warm rays as the sun peeks upon  
the horizon,  
The hills are too bright and lush to withstand  
such a bitter taste.  
Facing the flourishing deadly cliff, a collage of  
colours paints it as the waves crash furiously.  
Screaming and writhing in pain, the cliff silently  
stands, a fraction of what it once was.

# Keep the Door Closed

Miquelle Taubman

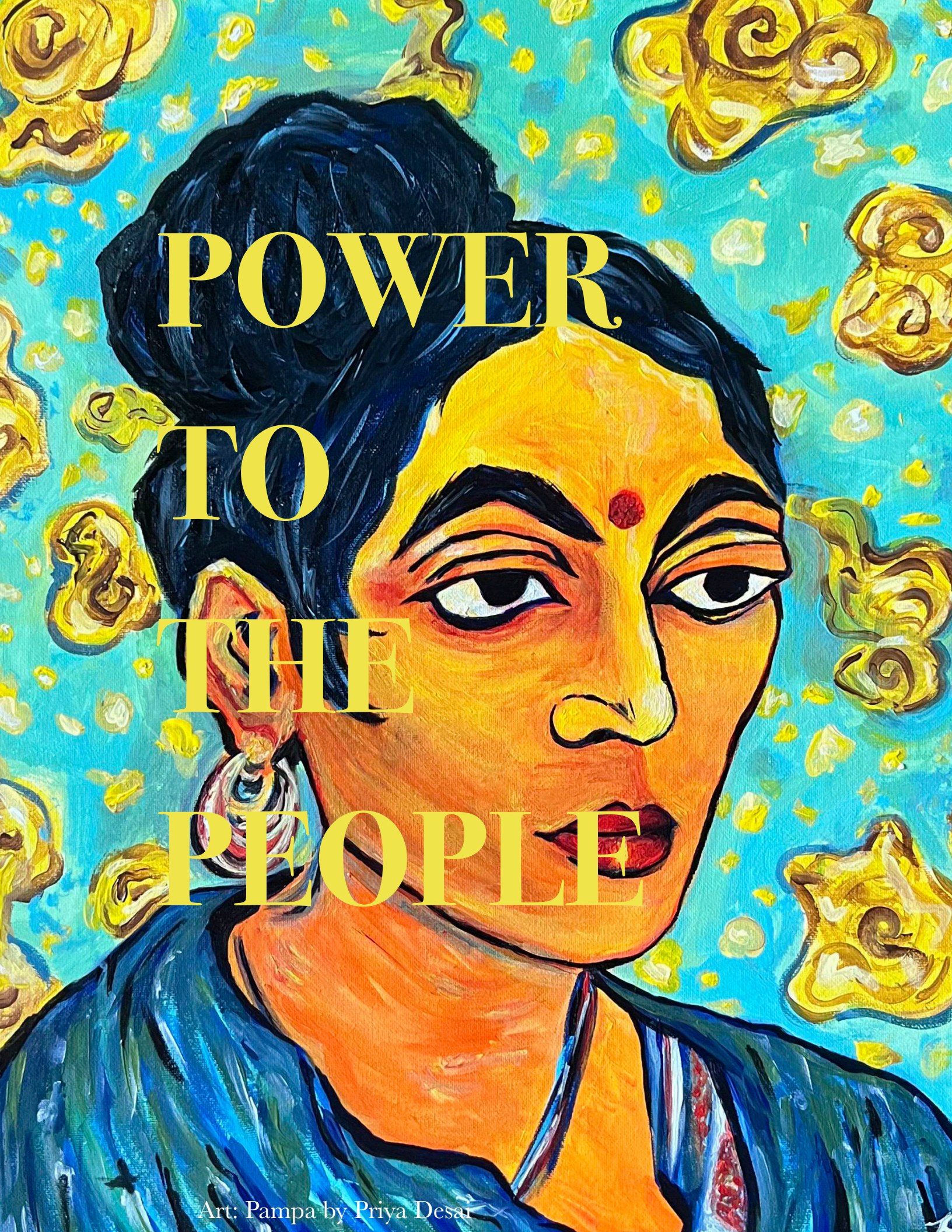
we only lived fifteen feet apart in our two bedroom city apartment  
and yet a mountain loomed between us  
i can't really place my finger on when that mountain started to grow  
we had that fight back in September that made us stop talking for a couple weeks straight  
but that was not the start  
that was the beginning of the end, yes  
but not the first instance  
i think maybe the split between us began to grow when you met him  
i never liked him  
i still don't  
i thought i knew why but maybe it was not what i thought  
maybe on some subconscious level i knew that he would take you away from me forever  
and he did  
we were never the same after you met him  
we used to sit on the couch and watch cartoons until you fell asleep  
we would sing along to music in the car  
and make silly videos to post online for nobody to even see  
and we would order our favorite takeout food and boba tea  
but after he arrived we did those things less and less  
until we never did them at all  
so no  
that fight in late September was not the beginning of that ravine  
it was the dotting of i's and crossing of t's  
it was the snip of our fated strings being severed, bidding us to part  
and when you finally moved away without saying goodbye a few days after my 22nd birthday  
i could not bring myself to enter the room that you left behind  
because it reminded me that you were no longer there  
it reminded me that we were no longer even friends  
that we were nothing but the past  
it reminded me that there was once a time when i thought our companionship would never and could never end  
and how ironic that all seems now  
so i kept the door shut  
i started to store some things in your room that i wasn't using all the time  
but for the most part i stayed out  
with the door still shut  
i let the room collect dust  
i could not bring myself to accept the truth  
if i kept that door closed i could pretend you were just away for the week at your boyfriend's house, his house  
or that maybe you were just visiting some family up north

to open the door would be to accept that you were really gone  
and that would simply not do  
so i ran and hid  
and dug deep deep holes to bury the truth  
but of course  
what you run from always catches up in the end  
and now i am stuck  
scrambling to fill the void that was born out of the remains of our once friendship  
i had to learn to live a life that does not include you  
i wish i knew it was love sooner  
maybe i would have known what to do  
maybe our lives would be different  
maybe we'd still be friends  
maybe we'd be more than that  
but that can never be  
and i think i don't want it to be  
but i don't know  
maybe i do  
it's hard to imagine life being better without you when you're all i ever knew  
and you two are still together living happily down in LA  
or that's what i hear  
i hope you're happy  
i think  
but i think i'd be happier if you were back here  
back home with me  
watching disney movies on the couch  
and eating chicken wings on mismatched hand-me-down ceramic plates  
we can put this all behind us  
but i know that will never ever be



ART: Still Life by Barbara Gibb





POWER  
TO  
THE  
PEOPLE

Art: Pampa by Priya Desai

# THE PROTEST OF LITERATURE: THE VOICES OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AS REPRESENTATIVE OF A COMPARATIVE LITERARY ANALYSIS

ARYA SHADAN

## INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been an offspring of thought and change through the agency it awards its characters and the opportunity to cascade their voices. In an evolving social landscape of inequality and marginalization lay those unable to overcome their indifference to the ignorance of oppression. Therein lies the essence of literature that encompasses the amplifying of the unheard and ignored voices of society. Although factors based on culture and region exist, any individual can become voiceless. The literature reviewed in this research stems from Honors English 110, a Composition, Literature, & Critical Thinking course that introduces threads of literary theories and genres to discuss their applications amongst each text. During the course, I exhibited the strong connection of literature's purpose to real-world social conflicts with the trending persistence of voicelessness amongst each text.

In Iran the "Women Life Freedom" Movement reflects an ongoing protest of voicelessness that parallels the purpose of literature. On September 16, 2022, Mahsa Amini was brutally beaten by Iran's moral police, who were "disciplining" Amini for not adhering to the Islamic hijab requirements. Women in Iran have historically faced significant limitations on their freedoms, including restrictions on their ability to dress as they please, work outside the home, and participate in the political process.

However, the killing of Mahsa Amini has sprung movements of inclusivity across the globe, to a scale that one could characterize as revolutionary. On top of exposure through literature, social media and technology has uplifted the people of Iran seeking to empower agency and hold accountable the atrocities of the Iranian regime. In this study, interviews conducted with prominent members of the Iranian Diaspora put into real-world perspective the purpose of amplifying voice, as seen in the discussed literature.

Through these interviews, key insights into Iranian Diasporic activism are revealed to amplify the voices protesting the regime. Moreover, activism within Iranian Diaspora acts synonymously with power of literature and its ability to inspire social change. *Howl*, *Recitatif*, *M. Butterfly*, *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette*, and *Americanah* surface the stories of marginalized characters whose voices

have been subverted in society. In each piece of literature, protagonists reclaim their agency, rejecting the construct of singular voice. Focusing on the protest within literature affirms the need for society to deny generic societal frameworks that marginalize those with a subaltern voice, revealing the common between literature and the Women Life Freedom Movement to amplify the voices of the underrepresented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature is a powerful tool for change that provokes thought and upwardly progresses society. This paper presents literature with non-linear and heavily multilayered storylines that protest persisting social issues. The array of literature provides a deeper understanding of how each character seeks liberation from a limiting identity and how the text liberates that identity. The five pieces of literature analyzed all pertain to different categories (poetry, short story, play, graphic novel, and traditional novel), showcasing literature's versatile ability to serve as a protest for voice. Immersing into the literary analysis, reveals each author's purpose to amplify the characters in their narratives. Similarly, the work produced by the Iranian Diasporic community awards agency to the people of Iranian seeking liberation from the regime. Each text's ability to uplift voice coupled with the activism occurring in the Iran Diasporic community highlights the purpose of literature to inform change.

### ALLEN GINSBERG, *HOWL*.

In *Howl*, the speaker's voice represents the reality of a group of individuals in society—left unheard and ignored. Throughout the poem, the speaker in the text remains anonymous/unknown but begins by stating, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked" (Ginsberg 1). The bold fashion sets the stage for a group of voices facing apparent blindness from society. Furthermore, there is a direct parallel between formalism and the subaltern voice. Through formalism, each literary structure incorporates hidden meanings. In *Howl*'s footnote, the speaker shouts, "The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!" (Ginsberg Line 7). The anaphora of "holy" and mystic tone of the speaker reflects an intention to convey a meaning that attributes "holiness" to the subaltern voice.

Ginsberg relays activism through a post-structuralist form of literature to illuminate a protest of normalcy. The forefront of religion and emblematic social "punctuation" limits individuals who do not conform, leaving them unheard. The dominance of figurative social frameworks creates

images of unitary identity, othering the select members of society. Founded upon acceptance, *Howl* is an optimistic message to readers that regardless of conformity, you are accepted

### TONI MORRISON *RECITATIF*.

Toni Morrison's short story, *Recitatif*, describes a relationship between two daughters, their mothers, and a disabled orphanage employee named Maggie in New York. Morrison omits all racial markers in the short story to leave interpretations of race to the reader and uncovering racialized assumptions they may develop. In one instance, Protagonist Twyla states, "Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside... And when the gar girls pushed her down and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't-just like me and I was glad about that" (Morrison 36). Morrison provides a space within literature by giving voice to characters who are unable to "scream" or be heard. Through the absence of identifiers concerning race, gender, and class, each character is enabled accessibility of their voice by readers. The enigmatic form of the text works to overcome preconceived notions about characters and makes their voice available to readers.

Moreover, an emphasis on gender and disability reveals the subverted voices within the text. Morrison's ability to portray each character in such senses brings to light the amplitude of inequality experienced by each character. Specifically, the depleted voices of Mary and Maggie deny them any social acceptance. Twyla remarks to Maggie, stating, "What if she wants to cry? Can she cry?" (Morrison 8). The metaphorical attribution of mutual marginalization becomes apparent through Twyla's seemingly imitative curiosity regarding Maggie's inability to cry. Furthermore, Twyla subverts her agency by focusing on the livelihood of Maggie and Mary—her mother. Twyla does not feel remorse for them, rather she relates to Maggie's subaltern voice and states, "I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't-just like me and I was glad about that" (Morrison 37). Morrison employs Twyla's affirmation of interconnectedness with Maggie to help readers conceptualize the inequality they share.

Spivak holds the post-colonial ideal that symbolizes the loss of solidarity in feminine figures like Maggie and Twyla. Spivak writes in *Can the Subaltern Speak* that "women are at the issue, one whose minimal predication as indeterminate is already available to the phallo-

centric tradition” (Spivak 82). The organic excellence of feminine figures—like Maggie and Mary—is depleted by the normative definition of who is respectable in society. Morrison chooses the highlight the voices of Twyla, Mary, and Maggie to epitomize the value of the subaltern voice.

In *Recitatif*, the power of literature surfaces their shared struggle regarding gender inequality, limited solidarity, and disability. The text invites readers to consider how characters lose agency in their voices, making Morrison’s purpose as an author to amplify their stories into society—similar to the Iranian diaspora. *Recitatif* brings attention to the unattended, relaying a message to readers that disparages any bounds upon marginalized characters.

#### DAVID HENRY HWANG M. BUTTERFLY.

In the form of a play, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* presents the life of a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, consumed with attraction to an exoticized Chinese woman, played by Song Liling, a man. In one instance, Song Liling describes the impacts of his identity to Rene Gallimard. It reads “It’s not a question of whether I’m a man or a woman, but of how I can be both and still retain my dignity as a human being” (Hwang II.1.45). Song challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes by suggesting that gender identity is a fluid and complex concept that can coexist in multiple forms. The play challenges norms in society and gives voice to the under-represented to delve past the context of movements and into cultural trends that reveal a pattern of voice in Western identity that dominates and exoticizes Eastern identities.

In *M. Butterfly*, Rene Gallimard’s overpowering persona toward Song Liling represents the cultural hegemony within Western affection for the East. Song asserts that “the West has sort of an international rape mentality toward the East,” while continuing to enable Gallimard’s unfathomable persona (Hwang 62). Therefore, Song represents an oppressed version of the Orient, as he conforms to Gallimard’s western rape mentality. Furthermore, the inclusion of meta-textuality through allusions to the opera *Madame Butterfly* accentuates the Western cultural hegemony that dominates the East. Therefore, it reveals a pattern of voice in Western identity that dominates the oriental Eastern.

The purpose of Hwang’s metatextual literary structure stands as a representation of the lost voices in the world today. Researcher and playwright Dorinne Kondo affirms that “*M. Butterfly* subverts and undermines the notion of unitary identity based on a space of inner truth and the plentitude of referential meaning” (Kondo 6). Kondo’s assertion regarding a rejected unified truth emboldens the protest of singular identity seen within *M. Butterfly*. Furthermore, literary critic, Mari Yoshihara, conducted an extensive analysis of the alluded opera *Madame Butterfly*, reasoning with the arguments of Kondo and outlining the cultural norms of West and East seen in

*M. Butterfly*.

Yoshihara affirms that “cultural hegemony operates in ways much more complex than a one-directional flow of power from the west to the rest” (Yoshihara 998). *M. Butterfly* represents a recurring trend in seeking agency between the East and the West that fuels the hegemony of one’s voice—seen most prominently between Rene Gallimard and Song Liling. The complex nature of Hwang’s play intends to inform readers about an othered trend of cultural hegemony that extends across the globe. Moreover, the endeavors seen in activism of the Women Life Freedom Movement alludes to the thrashing of barriers that subvert voice.

#### CHIMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE AMERICANAH.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Novel, Americanah*, employs a protest of voice for Ifemelu, a young black female immigrant who moves to the United States to attend college. In the story, Ifemelu’s blog serves as a way for her to assert her agency and reclaim her narrative in a society where her voice and experiences as a Nigerian immigrant woman are often silenced or ignored.

In one instance, Ifemelu states, “The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black, and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 418). Ifemelu’s blog gives another form of voice for Ifemelu to be herself. Specifically, by incorporating the blog into the novel, Adichie employs metatextuality to challenge the narratives of the dominant culture and rouse the voice of characters demeaned by society.

The inclusion of the blog is also relevant to the Iranian Diaspora and their protests for instilling agency amongst marginalized voices. Specifically, the process of engaging with social media amplifies voice and exposes oppression, and thus, Adichie’s work invites readers to understand the various methods we can use to catalyze change. Ijeoma Ngwaba, an author of the peer-reviewed journal, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, of the Western identity. Ngwaba asserts that “[Ifemelu’s] voice, in essence, is not that of a rejected, subjugated and dehumanized people but rather a voice of emancipation” (Ngwaba). Ifemelu’s emancipated voice becomes evident through her blog, where she shares her guide to those who attempt American assimilation. Ifemelu directs her blog toward non-American Blacks, stating that “when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop Arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. Amer-

ica doesn’t care” (Adichie 273). Adichie’s incorporation of Ifemelu’s blog parallels the meta-textuality of *Madame Butterfly* in *M. Butterfly*, informing readers of an ongoing literary protest. Furthermore, the hegemony of voice seen among both pieces of literature speaks to different contexts of inequality that marginalize Song and Ifemelu.

#### THE PROTEST OF LITERATURE.

Howl, *Recitatif*, Sally Heathcote: Suffragette, *M. Butterfly*, and *Americanah* protest the frameworks of singular voice by exposing cultures—impelled by a hegemonized voice—to inform societal change among readers. The reviewed literature of this paper represents only a minority of the lost voices in society. Each of the five literary pieces retained different approaches to highlight and inform the value of the subaltern voice. Literature is the champion of the subaltern voice, bringing light to their undermined value in society. Without literature, the voices of marginalized characters would persist unheard, as the “empowered” individuals of society compel unitary cultures. Individuals must immerse themselves in literature to promote equity for all voices, overcoming the singular voice to dominate social narratives. By applying the lens of formalism, gender studies, and Spivak’s subaltern theory each author brings to the light stories of subverted characters within their stories. Therefore, literature overcomes Western paradigms that limit voice and strengthens their agency within society.

#### CONCLUSION

All this to say, Use your voice. Through literature and the Iranian Diaspora, many different paths exist for amplifying the voices of those protesting for change. By applying formalism, gender studies, and Spivak’s subaltern theory to each text, the voices of marginalized characters are amplified. Through each storyline, the sense of voicelessness amongst unitary social constructs was dissolved, as the experiences of marginalized characters (Twyla, Song, Ifemelu, and others) were brought to light. The Iranian Diaspora also offers instances where various forms of expression amplify protesting voices in Iran. It is my intent to inspire you to apply your voice as a catalyst for change and to recognize the endless possibilities for amplifying underrepresented voices—as seen in the agency of literature and the Women Life Freedom Movement.

Additionally, forms of creativity, scholarli-

ness, and advocacy have been methods of amplifying the voices of the Iranian Revolution, all to inform and actuate change. Diasporic Iranians are splicing their passion with activism to bring a greater sense of solidarity to the Women Life Freedom Movement. Through the Diasporic Connection, leadership seen in Abbas Milani and Persis Karim underscores the importance of cascading voice to uplift agency in the Women Life Freedom Movement. Furthermore, amongst each interviewee, a strong passion existed to liberate those under the regime and to provide further voice to the Women's Life Freedom Movement of Iran. Through literature and the Iranian Diaspora, this paper advances the amplifying of those using their voice to inform change. The forms of authors, literary genres, and interviewed diasporic Iranians divulges agency, cultivating platforms for voice to be heard and the change to progress.

## *Women Life Freedom*

### *Zan Zendegi Azadi*

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# THE COST OF INDIFFERENCE

KIMBERLY MALABANAN

If you notice a stranger in distress in your peripheral vision, are you more likely to get up and offer help, or sit there and pretend you saw nothing? In a society where life is so fast-paced and a focus is set on individual success, it's common for people to naturally overlook others' need for help if they aren't directly affected. The poem "Musee des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden is written about two paintings depicting the way life can easily go on for people as others suffer in the background, criticizing this fact through carefully chosen diction. Similarly, "not an elegy for Mike Brown" by Danez Smith, written by a Black man about hardships occurring in his community, denounces how easily society can turn a blind eye to injustice if those in their own circles are left unharmed. "Phantom Noise" by Brian Turner, a war veteran, describes the horrifying effects of war for all sides of the battle through vivid imagery and explicit language. Although all of these poems discuss the consequences of being completely desensitized and indifferent to the world around you, Auden takes on a descriptive, birds-eye perspective while Smith and Turner tie in their life experiences and tell stories encompassing a call for action.

In "Musee des Beaux Arts", Auden takes on a general lens and utilizes the differing concepts of extreme suffering versus mundane activities to highlight how easily humans can ignore the suffering of others, as long as they're not directly affected. The poem starts off strong with the statement: "About suffering they were never wrong" (Auden, 1), firmly establishing an overall theme and topic. Using poetic inversion, an emphasis is placed on the concept of suffering and readers are quickly able to determine that the poem will be centered around it. The speaker continues to build on the topic, stating that "it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just looking fully along;" (Auden, 3-4). The tasks listed in line 4 are often overlooked or left unmentioned in a routine because of how ordinary they truly are. The unfortunate reality being told is how suffering often occurs in the background of everyone's lives, but we choose to ignore it in hopes of protecting the mundane peace we've established. Even if there's nothing particularly extraordinary happening that may be winning over our attention, we simply don't bother to sacrifice our time on things that aren't deemed worthy enough for it.

The first stanza of the poem focuses on a painting that depicts the biblical story of King Herod calling for all Jewish babies to be murdered, following the news that a king was going to be born among them. Birth is usually something to anticipate and celebrate, but it was difficult to do so in such conditions. The speaker asserts that "For the miraculous birth, there always must be / Children who did not specially want it to happen" (Auden, 6-7), juxtaposing the idea of a birth being miraculous with it simultaneously being unwanted. Similarly to the earlier lines in the poem where two contrasting ideas are placed together and compete for attention, the more comfortable choice will always dominate, even if it isn't exactly the best option. Humans often choose to avoid discomfort instead of facing it head on, tying into the speaker's point about how easily suffering can be ignored by outsiders as long as they themselves aren't harmed. The speaker also states that "Even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course" (Auden 10), highlighting how even suffering that occurs after selflessness and sacrifice is not excluded from this indifference.

Auden uses contrasting low and high intensity language that makes the line feel more substantial. The word 'dreadful' can be used in many different contexts on a daily basis, whereas 'martyrdom' is a more specific word that holds heavy connotations and meaning. Altruistic acts may be celebrated for a bit, but as everyone settles back into their usual routines, they're quickly forgotten and swept under the rug.

In the second stanza, Auden takes us to another painting in

the museum that emphasizes the ease at which others' suffering can be sucked into the background of one's daily life. People are often so focused on their own hustles that anything that doesn't directly have an effect on them is left unnoticed or placed on the back burner. The ploughman in the painting is depicted in the foreground calmly walking along and doing his job, while Icarus drowns in the background, because "for [the ploughman] it was not an important failure;" (Auden, 17). Despite the likelihood of the man hearing or seeing Icarus fall to his death, he seems unfazed as he continues on with his workday. The speaker also mentions "the expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on" (Auden, 19-21). The ship is illustrated to be right behind Icarus, making it hard to believe that no one on it witnessed the tragedy. It's described as "expensive" and "delicate" (Auden, 19), suggesting that it was a ship with valuable cargo, which explains why the workers wouldn't risk letting anything distract them in transit.

The speaker goes further as to detail the sight as "something amazing" (Auden, 20), with the diction suggesting that the image of Icarus falling from the sky could have been seen as a form of entertainment for the workers on the ship. While it's a catastrophic and life-changing event for one side, for the other, it's a fun story they get to gossip about among coworkers and recall to their family when they get home. Dehumanization is often seen in cases of severe apathy, and it's used in the poem to further expand its point about how easily one's suffering can go unnoticed. Icarus is merely described as "The white legs disappearing into the green / Water" (Auden, 18-19), reducing him to nothing but that sad image as he falls to his death. If the painting's title didn't have his name or the poem didn't mention him, it's likely that he'd be one of the last things that observers see despite being such a vital component of the art pieces.

"Not an elegy for Mike Brown" by Danez Smith is written from the perspective of the Black community for an audience of non-Black people, describing the effects of staying complacent while witnessing injustice, which communities often do if their own circle is left unharmed. Similarly to Auden's, the opening line of this poem is powerful and effortlessly captures the attention of readers, with the speaker stating, "I am sick of writing this poem" (Smith, 1). The poem's subject matter is like that of an elegy as it's written following one's death, but as the title clarifies, it is not written like a typical posthumous speech. By describing themselves as "sick of writing this", the speaker makes it clear that the event leading up to this poem was not at all a rare occurrence.

Despite the tired tone in this first line, the poem's momentum is immediately elevated with the next lines demanding, "bring the boy, his new name / his same old body, ordinary, black / dead thing" (Smith, 2-4). Again, the detrimental normality of the situation is emphasized as the speaker describes the victim as having a new name, yet the same appearance as past victims. Dehumanization also occurs as the body is referred to as an "ordinary, black / dead thing" (Smith, 3-4), similar to how Icarus is reduced to just his legs in Auden's poem. However, the critical detail that sets the two situations apart is the fact that Smith is writing about a real-life event and victim. The dehumanization in Smith's poem is ironic, meant to criticize the way the media often dehumanizes Black people in an attempt to make them out to be the villain when situations like this arise. The speaker goes further to describe the experience of living as a Black person as "the feeling / you get when you are looking / at your child, turn your head, / then, poof, no more child" (Smith, 7-10). Their community is faced with the same

situation so often that as it continues to occur, their reactions have been reduced to numbness. Being Black is no longer something to easily celebrate and take pride in, but instead it has become something to fear. The speaker wants readers to understand how important it is for outsiders to recognize this issue and take action in order to stop the cycle.

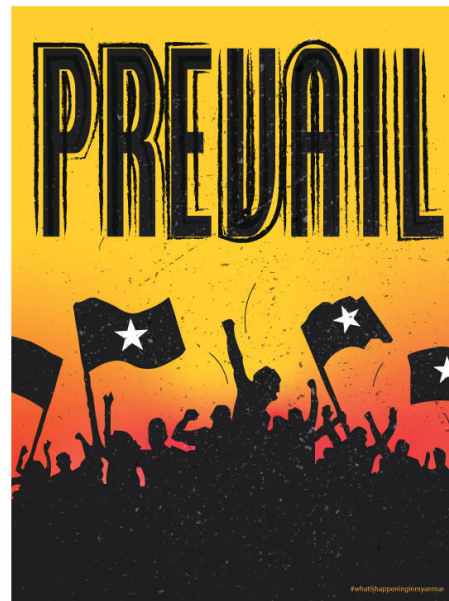
Smith uses real-life examples of his community being mistreated simply because of their difference in skin color, urging readers to empathize and call for system-wide changes to be made. Even without going into explicit detail for the examples, it's difficult to argue that the narrative being illustrated is different from reality. The speaker states, "think: once, a white girl / was kidnapped & that's the Trojan war. / later, up the block, Troy got shot / & that was Tuesday" (Smith, 12-15). Although the events have very similar weight and seriousness, the reactions to both are complete opposites. When tragedy strikes and the situation revolves around a white person, they have the support and attention of everyone — even those outside of their circle. However, because of the normalization of equivalent tragedies in the Black community, when disaster strikes, outsiders are silent and seemingly unaffected, able to go about their days as usual. This discrepancy is what the speaker wants to fight back against, encouraging readers to truly open their eyes to the world around them and take action instead of standing on the sidelines.

In this call to action, the speaker explicitly declares what's needed: "I demand a war to bring the dead boy back / no matter what his name is this time" (Smith, 20-21). Using the term "dead boy" to refer to the victims throws all sugar coating out the window, in an attempt to get readers to understand the true gravity of what's going on and feel more urged to do or say something. The second line of the quote is another reminder that their community seems to be stuck in a cycle that no one can stop, with the diction showing that they know that the event happening again is inevitable. The tired tone that starts the poem returns in the next line where the speaker states, "I at least demand a song. A song will do just fine" (Smith, 22). In reality, a song is nothing compared to the damage that their community has already faced, but there is so little being done that even something as simple as that would be a step towards progress. Overall, this poem can be related to Auden's with a similar message, but Smith's is shared in a much more exclusive and personal manner. Instead of simply describing what he sees the way that Auden does, Smith's poem is a loud call for action and change.

Like an alarm urging one to get ready to take action, Turner uses the repetition of the word "ringing" throughout the poem to encourage readers to stay engaged with the outside world by staying alert at all times. The speaker points out a "ringing hum" (Turner, 1), hook-

ing readers in similarly to how Auden and Smith are able to in the opening of their poems. The title of the poem introduces the overall theme of a "phantom noise" in the speaker's head, which readers can assume is the ringing that is repeated over ten times in the poem. The word phantom is associated with things that seem to exist but aren't really there, which ties into the PTSD that naturally manifests after going through something as disastrous as a war. By educating themselves and staying alert, readers can be ready to spring into action to prevent things like this from continuing to occur. Turner is similar to Smith in this sense, as they both aim to inform readers and urge them to be vigilant about real-life topics that hold personal value to them. While Smith focuses on the consequences of indifference on his own community, Turner has a more expanded lens that shines a light on the consequences of indifference on all sides. The speaker also highlights the long term consequences of war by bringing up ancient battles, describing "these years ringing / rifles in Babylon rifles in Sumer" (Turner, 8-9). Despite how much time has passed, the speaker wants readers to understand that time does not alleviate the tragic effects of war. This use of imagery can be compared to Auden who relies on visual descriptions to depict his points. The difference is that Auden shows the result of no one taking action, whereas Turner shows what it's like to care about others' suffering.

The poems "Musee des Beaux Arts", "not an elegy for Mike Brown", and "Phantom Noise" all show how well poetry can encapsulate themes due to its flexibility and creative freedom. With its lack of rules, poetry is the perfect medium to use to share personal experiences that have true meaning and importance, and it can assist readers in viewing the world from different angles. One's moral compass and values can be spilled onto a page in a way that can't be done in other forms of writing. On the surface level, these poems seem to be about completely different topics, but the more one digs and analyzes, it's clear that the poets are actually trying to convey very similar messages. A poem can range from simple observations to a call for action, making the literary genre even more special.



# CASAMIENTO

NATALYA TABORA ISAULA

I can smell the pinto beans from across the hallway. I saunter over to them sitting on the stove, drenched in still water. Mami called me the night before, asking how many pouches she should buy while she was at Mi Rancho. The black beans were okay at Safeway. It's just that they barely have any variance on the shelves, the same two beans staring at you while you peruse around. Mi Rancho isn't far from our apartment, but Safeway is within walking distance. I decided three pouches were fine for now.

"What type of beans are you getting, though?" I put her on speaker and laid the phone next to me while I worked on a discussion post due in eight hours.

"Well, I have to get pinto or else your sister won't eat them, so," her voice lowered into the phone.

I grunted and wallowed a goodbye to my precious black beans. Pinto beans are fine. Personally, I think all beans taste the damn same but pinto beans? Really?

I turn back to those beans and I'm puzzled. I'm unsure what mami wants us to do, or if she even wants the help, so I let them sit. I'd be too afraid to ruin the precious protein, and even more afraid to listen to her ranting about how we never know how to do things correctly. Bella usually leaves them alone until they're cooked. She's not much of a chef. When I saw mami tossing out the bad beans, I knew we'd be eating good for a long while. Maybe it's the years of practice but as her hands quickly grasped multiple beans, and with eyes like a hawk, sifted through them to find any sketchy patterns, she plopped them aside, like they were nothing.

I grin and walk myself towards the couch where my feet find the stool to rest on. My leg still hurts from my fall in LA and I forced Bella to abdicate her stool. She rolled her eyes but offered me ice for it. I look over to her. She's sitting on her pink lounge chair, her legs propped up on the arms of it with the Netflix home screen blaring in the background. I hear random audios coming from her phone. Ah, she's scrolling through TikTok. I lean towards her and count how long it takes for her to notice my staring. She cracks a smile every few seconds and with the slight shift in her hand movements, I can tell that she sent that particular video to me. I glance at my phone and see it to be true. My eyes trail back to her and her face contorts into a startled one. Her brows bunch together and she shakes her head.

"What's up?" I ask her.

With a petrified face, she mutters, "I'll send it to you."

I stare back at her with a disgusted and confused look, mouth agape. She shakes her head again and grabs a couple Cheerios into her mouth. The regular kind, not honey. I shrug and turn to my phone, resting my head on the chair's arm. The poor TV sits there in anguish of not being given attention to, with the same screen glaring far away. Minutes

pass like that when I hear the door unlocking. Mami walks in, carrying her lunchbox in her left hand and her phone in the other. The earbuds are plugged in and I hear her speaking Spanish into the phone. It's Nana. I leave her be after giving her a large smile and return to texting my friends. "Ah, ok, ok. Te llamo mañana, mami. Ok, ok, you too. Bye," Mami puts her phone down and sighs while stretching her arms out. A few minutes later I hear her chopping cilantro and culantro into the pot. I jump and walk over to my usual spot in the kitchen. I sneak a peek into what she's doing and

I see her chopping away at the onions.

Perhaps she sensed a nuisance in her kitchen because she quickly remarks "don't make that face. It adds flavor."

She laughs while I sigh and I tell her all about my weird adventure with the singing man on the bus and the annoying classmate who wouldn't stop flexing about how rich he is. It's our daily bonding time where we both gossip about crappy people or ask for reassurance about whether or not we are doing a good job at choosing what will make us happy. Many people tell me my face is expressive, but she has me beat.

Her gasps, grunts and giggle are just as present with her as they are with me. I chop the cheese as she retells her own adventures, though of course they are not as interesting as my day was. Adult problems are much too boring for me, but her work drama has me sat like I'm watching a

telenovela. She rolls her eyes as she tells me that Safiyaa called in sick AGAIN and that now she has to work Monday even though she wasn't supposed to.

"And you'll get paid for that?"

"Yup, thank God."

We both hum along to the song that came in shuffle and laugh at how drastically different the songs are from each other. I glance back at the ringing beans and see that they are practically done. The rice cooker blares its signal and releases a beautiful fog, reaching all the way to the ceiling. I put my face over the steam and my pores open up, welcoming the vapor inside.

"Bella, come get dinner!" I scramble to get my own bowl before she complains about too many people occupying space all at once.

Our kitchen is humble. The fridge is home to several magnets, drawings and photos of friends and family. Cream cabinets line the walls and the counters are hardly ever empty. The microwave and airfryer take up space from the emptiness, so it's bothersome to craft my bean soup dinner with the other two there. Scooping out the rice, I



ART: Diospyros Kaki by Karen Shi

plop it into my designated red-flower bowl. The waft of beans hits me with nostalgia and I long to eat my grandma's food again. Rather than using the blasphemous pinto beans, she resorts to black beans, though to be honest I'm not entirely confident with this theory. Nana always cooks on her own and doesn't like it when there are random people in the kitchen who aren't helping.

As I've gotten older, I've tried to pay more attention to what she's doing from a fair distance away so as not to disturb her. I'll have to wait until we take a trip to North Carolina to solidify my theory. The sour cream is only a day old yet there is already a liquid film at the top. With no whipping cream, mami says to make due with what we got. I grasp the cheese and crumble it roughly in the bowl. Before Bella could even step foot in the kitchen, I ran off, blowing on my soup as I do. I mix the delicacies together staring back at the TV. Our dining room table is currently being used as a home desk for Bella and I to

do our homework, so the couch is the only place to truly make ourselves comfortable. Those suburban family dinners where the kids and parents all sit together at a nice, long wood table is foreign to us. Not to say I would even prefer that when it feels more cozy to snuggle up on the couch. Bella and mami sit on either side of me, discussing who their favorite character is in the new Lord of the Rings show. Netflix's homepage displays *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* and mami's face lights up.

"No, we are not watching that again," Bella and I say in unison. We grin at each other to my mom's dismay and dig into our meals. The queso fresco hits my tongue, crumbling and melting into the beans for a full sensation of bliss.

"I can't wait to have this for the next week," I tease, making mami and Bella laugh as I do.

ART: Night at the Lake by Priya Desai





# *Belonging and Purpose as Fundamental Cornerstones of a Meaningful Life*

*OLEG NIKITASHIN*

More and more people are turning to Artificial Intelligence for answers to their everyday questions. We can ask Artificial Intelligence the age-old question: “What is the purpose of my life? What am I living for?”, but created as a machine learning model, it doesn't have personal beliefs, emotions, or a subjective experience of life. Unlike humans, AI doesn't possess consciousness or self-awareness. The question of the meaning of life is a deeply philosophical and subjective one that has been debated by humans for centuries. Different people, cultures, and belief systems offer various perspectives on this question. Nonetheless, in the new modern world with an enormous flow of information, notifications, and other distractions, like social media and TV, the quest for meaning, happiness, and fulfillment has become difficult to resolve. In her engaging and thought-provoking book, “The Power of Meaning,” Emily Esfahani Smith illustrates what people need to bring meaning to their lives. There is no simple and common roadmap; for everyone, the path may be different and individual. The author gives us a concept of four pillars of meaning which are Belonging, Purpose, Transcendence, and Storytelling. Smith shares with us her rich life experiences, and interviews, and offers many fascinating articles from psychology, sociology, and philosophy which help her disclose a comprehensive narrative that goes beyond simple definitions or pursuits of happiness and hedonism and dives deep into the sense of what it means to live a meaningful life.

In my own case, Belonging and Purpose are fundamental cornerstones in attempting to build a life with significance.

Let me take you back to a moment when I realized that my basketball team was an excellent example of what it means to belong. As I navigate through the pages of Smith's chapter Belonging, I find she confirms the pillar of belonging is a fundamental component of a meaningful life; she asserts that “Research has shown that among the benefits that come with being in a relationship or group, a sense of belonging clocks in as the most important driver of meaning” (Smith 49). It involves feeling connected to and valued by your friends, family, or even classmates or co-workers. Smith emphasizes the importance of being part of a larger group which can be a religious club, a social club, a neighborhood, or any other social group where individuals come together for a shared purpose or experience. The author describes a great example of the SCA club: “Like all tight-knit communities, the SCA helps its members develop close relationships with a small group of people. But it also creates a network of trust and support among all its members” (Smith 63). Being part of such communities provides a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of something larger than oneself.

Contemplating my past, I uncovered that when I left school and attended college for my first bachelor's degree in 2004, initially, I was focused on doing my homework and just getting good grades without any participation in student activities. Of course, this is a great intent to do your homework, of course it is a noble goal to achieve a high score, and yeah it can be a pillar called Purpose. However, for now, I want to delve into the concept of Belonging and share my experience of why joining clubs and communities can be a wise decision. Halfway through my first semester, as a freshman, I realized that it would be nice to get a bigger scholarship than just standard. One option was to bring something useful into college life, something that you like to do and something that you can do well. I decided to join the college basketball team. And so, I found not just friends and a community, I would call it my second family, when we helped each other in training and games, and even in the educational process with homework. At that moment, I definitely didn't think about Belonging, that it was a fundamental part of my life, and only after grad-

uating from college I fully realized what it means to belong.

In hindsight, in my teenage era, I see how discovering the phenomena of the motorcycle community changed my perception of belonging. This has been a mystery to me. Exploring how people are creating these groups, tribes, and communities I found a great illustration of why being a part of a community matters for us as human beings is understanding the fundamentals of our nature. I got this insight from the great book by Yuval Noah Harari, the author of “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.” Harari's research includes various aspects of human history, including the cognitive, agricultural, scientific, and cultural revolutions that shaped our society and the world. In his book, he mentioned:

...our language evolved as a variant of gossip. Homo sapiens is first and foremost a social animal. Social cooperation is our key to survival and reproduction. It is not enough for some men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. For them, it is much more important to know who of their troop hates whom, who sleeps with whom, who is honest, and who is cheating (Harari 65).

That is logical, historical, and biological proof that community matters for us more on the evolutionary level as well as emotional. We have been getting together, trying to keep in groups for more than a hundred thousand years and we cannot argue with the evolution process or just break it in days because we want it. As I reflect on my journey with motorcycle clubs, one pivotal moment stands out; having once met guys who rode motorcycles and were getting together close to my garage, I saw something in common with each of them, they were more than just enthusiasts; they're a community with shared values, interests, and a unique culture that sets them apart. When you see a massive group of motorcycles cruising together, you're witnessing a visual representation of this collective identity.

It is difficult to formulate what specifically unites them; perhaps at a fundamental level it is the acceptance of risk or belonging to a minority in the big world of vehicles. However, the most important thing that I noticed for myself is the brotherhood of the people who share a common vision of unity, service and respect for one another and the willingness to always help each other on the road and beyond, something that we sometimes lack in order not to feel abandoned in this world.

Equally, on its own Belonging is not enough. Since I was very young, I was involved in contributing to the family: washing dishes, cleaning our apartment, and working on temporary gigs during the summer breaks. Thus, early experiences in contributing to the family can extend to a broader sense of social responsibility and community involvement. Individuals may develop a purpose in making a positive impact on their communities or the world at large. Smith suggests that contributing to your community or society can enhance your sense of belonging. When you actively participate and give back to the groups you belong to, it reinforces your connection and sense of purpose within those communities. According to William Damon, a developmental psychologist at Stanford, “First, purpose is a “stable and far-reaching” goal” (Smith 77); second, “purpose involves a contribution to the world” (Smith 78). Smith reflects, “Teens, who help their families with tasks like cleaning, cooking, and caring for siblings, for example, also feel a greater sense of purpose” (Smith 78). From my earliest memories, I can recall contributing to my grandma and grandpa's small farm during the summer breaks has been a source of immense pride and fulfillment for me. There's a unique sense of joy that comes from

being actively engaged in the daily rhythms of farm life, from tending to the crops to most interesting to me - fixing equipment and the house. Witnessing the tangible impact of my efforts, like building a useful rack from scratch or fixing the irrigation system, fills me with a deep sense of accomplishment. The connection to the land and the satisfaction of knowing that I play a role in sustaining our family's heritage and well-being make every task feel meaningful.

More recently, my immigration experience led to the separation from my community, family, and friends, and only that is how I fully realized what it meant to belong. Belonging is where community could be the first and most important cornerstone of a meaningful life. Consequently, now I both comprehended it and felt it. For 30 years I used to live among a certain circle of people: family, friends, co-workers, and people with whom we shared hobbies and activities. All of this seemed ordinary, almost taken for granted, rather than a gift, and obviously, as a result, I did not fully appreciate it. It was only after moving to another country, sometime later, that I began to understand that I had lost a part of the community that had been created over the years. We don't miss the water until the well runs dry. After a few years out of my family and friends, I realized that the sense of Belonging continues to hold a significant role in our lives. Eventually, here in the US, I rediscovered my passion for motorcycles, and the experience mirrored the same sense of community. Whether it was, comprehending my theory which also applies here in a different country and culture, or simply rekindling feelings of belonging again, the details may be insignificant. What matters is that I once again felt the significance of being part of a community.

Meanwhile, as I said early, belonging alone might not be enough; it could be linked with a sense of purpose. I've been exposed to a deep connection between my passion for working on cars and motorcycles in the garage during weekends and the potential to contribute meaningfully to the world. The understanding that our talents and abilities are not just for our good but for the improvement of others is a powerful feature for finding meaning in life. The movie "Good Will Hunting" shows as a bright reminder that our talents should not be missed, but rather, they should be used to improve the lives of those around us and ourselves.

Smith mentioned in her book this movie, which delves into the complexities of human potential, emotional growth, and the quest for purpose. She points out the key quote: "You don't owe it to yourself. You owe it to me..." (Smith 92). This is what Will's friend said to him about how selfish an attitude he had in terms of throwing away his math talent and spending his life as a janitor at the university. In my case, being thoroughly engaged in maintenance, repairs, and innovative enhancements, I caught the attention of a few neighbors and friends who took notice of my skills. Their curiosity led them to question the purpose of my craft and eventually expressed a desire for my assistance in caring for their vehicles. This simple exchange became a spark for a deeper realization - that my sympathy for tinkering with automobiles not only brings me joy but also possesses the power to positively impact others. Their encouragement motivated me to think about the possibility of sharpening my talents and pursuing a career as an engineer in the automobile industry. In this journey, the purpose of life begins to unfold, intertwining personal fulfillment with the opportunity to contribute expertise to a broader community.

Given these points, at least two pillars of meaning - Belonging and Purpose offer great insights into the quest for a meaningful life. These pillars are tightly bound; nonetheless, each person may have their own unique way of identifying appropriate communities, such as church, college or university workshops, car clubs, fitness and wellness communities. Joining one that aligns with your passion can provide a valuable and enriching experience. I believe that a sense of purpose often emerges when one contributes to something beyond oneself. Whether through

community service, activism, or supporting a cause, engaging in activities that make a positive impact on the world can provide a profound sense of purpose. This guides us to another provocative question: How can we balance the pursuit of personal fulfillment in terms of belonging with our responsibility to contribute to our communities? Or an even more utopian question: how can we create a world where each person pursuing the goal of meaning matches with the collective quest for a more meaningful society? Just imagine a world where every individual uses their unique talents to make a positive impact, where communities are built on at least two cornerstones of belonging and purpose, and where the pursuit of happiness means the same as the pursuit of a meaningful life. It's an image of peace in the world, which could be our community that we can strive towards.

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PHOTO: 100 Year Friendship by  
Maryuri Aguilar Aguilar

# Bundle Up

CAELAN DYTIOCO

Food is a reflection of the people it mirrors. It embodies the cultural identity, values and beliefs of a distinct community, acting as a celebrated relation between individual and native country. In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "Mrs. Sen's," a person's connection with food is manifested to be an integral piece to one's existence and inner wellbeing. For Mrs. Sen, an immigrant, food is the vehicle that breathes life into her days and keeps her heart close to home. However, she struggles to assimilate to life in the United States, causing her to express discomfort in her latest reality. Lahiri emphasizes Mrs. Sen's frustration with balancing her fond memories and her ongoing situations. Though her cultural identity is deeply rooted in India, Mrs. Sen feels emotionally threatened by the constant pressures of American society.

The idea of being distant from her community introduces a feeling of isolation, challenging Mrs. Sen to keep her home close in spirit. Every afternoon, Mrs. Sen found comfort in preparing dinner by chopping up vegetables with her traditional Indian blade. To remind herself of the beloved memories she had in India, Mrs. Sen chooses to use the blade instead of a normal kitchen knife: "she had brought the blade from India, where apparently there was at least one in every household" (115). In America, Mrs. Sen's traditional blade feels out of place, echoing her own concerns of estrangement. Using the blade is a way for Mrs. Sen to keep India close to her core and protect her peace. She is aware that her customs do not align with societal norms. So she tries to relive her enjoyable experiences with Eliot, sharing how "all the neighborhood women [would] bring blades just like this one... laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night" (115).

Lahiri reveals Mrs. Sen's longing for community and relationships, suggesting that she relies heavily on her support system and appreciates the meaningful bonds that she creates. These memories bring Mrs. Sen joy, reminiscing of the times when she was most jubilant. This passion for her life is stripped of her, which causes Mrs. Sen to be low-spirited and sense a separation from the people she interacts with. Lahiri utilizes the blade to not only highlight Mrs. Sen's feelings towards being socially disconnected, but also her lack of a support system. A lady committed, Mrs. Sen endeavors to build a connection with Eliot's mother in search for any commonalities to her environment.

To show Mrs. Sen's discouraging relation to American society, Lahiri reveals the theme of rejection as Mrs. Sen opens herself up and becomes more vulnerable to others. Ever since the school year began, Eliot has been going to Mrs. Sen's house after school. In the afternoons, Eliot's mother would pick Eliot up. Mrs. Sen religiously offered food to Eliot's mother, but every time she refused to participate. Despite Eliot's mother's stubbornness, "Each evening [Mrs. Sen] insisted that [Eliot's] mother sit on the sofa, where she was served something to eat: a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah" (118). Accustomed to having people to turn to, Mrs. Sen is missing her closeness to her community and seeks a sense of belonging. Feeling incredibly distant from the people closest to her, she desires to fill the emptiness in her heart by sharing what she loves most, her Indian traditions. She attempts to bridge the gap between herself and Eliot and his mother with food. But Eliot's mother makes it clear to Mrs. Sen that their values do not

align with one another. To make matters worse, Eliot's mother lies to Mrs. Sen, explaining that "'[the food is] delicious,' she would conclude, setting down the plate after a bite or two. Eliot knew she didn't like the tastes; she'd told him once so in the car" (118). Uncomfortable in Mrs. Sen's apartment, Eliot's mother not only rejects Mrs. Sen's food, but also her hospitality.

It's evident that Mrs. Sen's traditions are not accepted by the people in her new environment. Food plays a significant role in Mrs. Sen's life; it is a tangible item that represents India and all the beauty it's given her. So, when Eliot's mother declines the food, Mrs. Sen feels shunned based on her disapproval. As a result, she feels alone and further detached from society. Rejected at every turn, Mrs. Sen begins to lose confidence in who she is as a loving and caring Indian woman.

Lahiri does not only use Mrs. Sen's adoration for traditional food to express togetherness with her cultural roots. In addition, the author tests Mrs. Sen's passion through obstacles and the strict governing of American society. Mrs. Sen is fixated on the idea of cooking fresh whole fish, exactly how she did in the country she's left. This idea brings joy to Mrs. Sen, but other people are not familiar with fish as much as she is. Mrs. Sen and Eliot pick up the coveted fresh fish and take the bus back to Mrs. Sen's place.

In disapproval, the bus driver looks back at Mrs. Sen and asks "What's in the bag?" Mrs. Sen looked up, startled. "Speak English" (132-133)? Embarrassed by the interaction, Mrs. Sen feels more isolated than ever before. It's made clear that she does not fit in with American society. Lahiri stresses this scene to bring the social construction of race to the forefront of the situation. Because of this, the bus driver sees Mrs. Sen is inferior to people like him. He automatically assumes that she cannot speak English and suggests that there is an issue with her bag. These judgements show that people like Mrs. Sen is not accepted into society because of her social and cultural differences. Again, the bus driver makes another remark, "the smell seems to be bothering other passengers" (133). After feeling alienated yet again, Mrs. Sen accepts being a misfit within American society.

Confused. Humiliated. Insulted. Mrs. Sen is shocked, immediately realizing her status as an outsider. This feeling of alienation from society forces Mrs. Sen to feel unsure of herself. Because she was unable to connect and find people who understand her, Mrs. Sen believes that there is something wrong with her instead of questioning her surroundings. The idea of exclusion consciously affects Mrs. Sen, awakening her to continuous emotions of self-doubt and purposelessness.

Feelings of emptiness often reflect a person, place or thing that is missing in one's life. People fill this void in all sorts of different ways. For Mrs. Sen, this is food. Lahiri utilizes food as a cultural signifier of Mrs. Sen's memories of India. As Mrs. Sen progressively sinks into a dark loneliness, food represents a way of reconnecting to her Indian roots and identity. It acts as an emotional flotation device to help keep Mrs. Sen above water while she faces the harsh realities of American society. As an immigrant, she tries to stay strong but experiences judgment and alienation, forcing her into a downward spiral of thoughts and feelings.

DEMOKRATIE  
MUSS JEDEN  
TAG ERNEUERT  
WERDEN.

DEMOCRACY MUST BE  
RENEWED EVERYDAY

Seren Benjamin

# Europe Collage



# Spirit Run: The Incredible Trek to Discovering Oneself

MALIA URBINA

Noé Alvarez the author and main character in the memoir, “Spirit Run”, tells his own story of self-discovery and of pushing boundaries, in new places both literally and within himself. Noé is from Yakima in Washington state, and his parents are immigrants from Mexico that have worked in Yakima for all of their adult life. Noé is slowly approaching the start of his own adult life. He is about to graduate from high school, and his options are coming into focus for him. He had his first real job just during the summer before his senior year, with his mother at a fruit packaging plant. This was the beginning of the realization of what his adult life could look like if he were to stay in Yakima. The most important aspect of Noé’s story is what he had to unlearn in order to grow and re-define his definition of success. This is the most important aspect because the people around him have shared experiences, which re-defined the importance of hope and culture; Noe learns from other people.

In Noé’s journey he is confronted with a situation: a binary, one bigger, and more defiant than his own dreams he so wishes to put into action. Noé is breaking the conformity that is created in the binary typical to his culture and environment, the two possible options, work or college. The city of Yakima operates like cogs in a machine, quite literally. The city is connected by its working force, who exerts all of their energy into exhausting labor, which takes place in factories or warehouses. Noé’s desire to see outside the confinements of Yakima and his beliefs begin when he works alongside his mom, at the packaging plant. In the plant, he realizes that his parents are very much connected to this industry; it is both their means of connectedness and their means of survival. However is not a lifestyle he can adopt to find fulfillment and a better understanding of himself. When Noé begins to identify the trends in his community, such as the makeup of his city and its glazed over components in stories, he is able to contrast the issues that can come with storytelling and people being withdrawn from places they’ve made their home. Alvarez is able to contrast the feelings of hope and hopelessness in new enterprises like Noé’s journey with PDJ. He will eventually be led into a journey dedicated to just that: understanding.

Until Noé joins PDJ he is not yet equipped with a story that escapes the binary. Throughout Noé’s time with the Peace and Dignity Journey Noé learns the importance of storytelling, as it inspires change in perspective for different parts of his life, that he can contrast with runners’ stories. Initially he knows little to nothing of the runners of PDJ. The driving emotion that prompted Noé’s decision was initially the feeling of longing. Noé longed for an experience that would bring him a new perspective. His perspective was informed by his parents’ life stories. The stories told to Noé were only those of surface level. Noé had an understanding. His people’s stories, much like his own, and his family’s, fragmented by means of separation, were lost in the day to day confinements. “This is Raymond Carver country- an area whose working-class narratives have been articulated to the world in the short stories of the local author” (Alvarez 22).

Noé understood that although people within his community had the same upbringing, those same people had something he didn’t have access to yet, a voice. A voice would allow Noé to access his full potential. He felt there was more to be brought to his own community that only so many people could scratch the surface of.

Running can lead to a good kind of unlearning. Running and language are closely connected in Noé’s life. Language and running introduced a semblance of patterns for Noé from the very beginning of his life in Yakima up until now:

“I know then that Peace and Dignity Journeys would represent for me the beginning of a new tradition- to remember our place on this earth, to break away, by the drumming of our feet, from the rhythm of old patterns” (Alvarez 143). Running is the most pertinent element to understanding Noé’s relationship to the physical and emotional pain he endured in his early years, and how he is able to name the pain, and reclaim it. For Noé the land offers a torn relationship with the land and the pain that comes with it; however, it

reminds him of his humanity and engages him with a world that he dreams to make his own: “Running is one such act for me, a bonding with the world through the soles of my feet” (Alvarez 43).

Noé’s decision to pivot from the path already chosen for him by his family and people into a new direction motivates him to pursue the “wrong path”, and to take risks that will ultimately create change for his community. When Noé joined PDJ he was able to relocate those lost parts of his community through the voices of the runners of PDJ. People who had experienced the same kind of pain because of the life changing decisions they made, the sacrifice that although they didn’t know it yet, were passing down and fulfilling a promise for future generations, communities made of runners, city kids, the world. Promising to her roots, Zayana Lonewolf too longed for an opportunity, a courageous mother who defied a system for her child’s freedom, as did Trigger from East Los Angeles who made up his own brotherhood, a safe space for those who too had a void to fill. It was defiance that brought their stories together and challenged the runners to make decisions that would change their lives forever. Part of Noe’s unlearning how he made decisions was allowing people to see him and hope they would value him the same way he wished for his own people to be viewed, appreciated, and maybe even adored. The root of his decision making would begin with his mother and father and understanding their maybe mundane but happy act of defiance was loving him and giving him a story that wouldn’t hurt him. His mother was his person that reminded him that his heritage and the perspective he was given about his life started with all he knew before expanding his world view. “She was probably afraid of what I’d see, or worse, that I might view her differently” (Alvarez 9). His time with the runners of PDJ proved he could unlearn that need to cater to the part of him that he’ll always tend to and gravitate towards, similarly to how the runners or PDJ did.

Noé taught us readers stagnant points are the periods potentially most detrimental while also worthwhile. When something is uncertain for Noé he is conflicted but when Noé begins to learn he is also conflicted with his newfound power of knowledge, and more importantly the choice at hand of what to do with it. Noe’s uncertainty challenges us to answer a question most can relate to. How enduring is the struggle of being halfway in a pivotal point in your life but also a standstill? When Noé unlearned his definition of success he was able to. He became better acquainted with versions of his family he was always insecure of. For Noé, living through the lens of all his parents’ flaws was the true success story for him. He named the successes of his own family’s best version of themselves by understanding the lack of presence and isolation done onto them affecting the way they could without resorting to extreme measures that would repeat cycles of trauma and new kinds of survival for them. The theme of finding belonging invokes true change. Noé found the truest change in himself through all the things he already knew. He was empowered by a change in his worldview and the contentment he found in being. As he saw it, there were many strides taken before eventually unveiling the secret to success that was there all along. Unity. Unity was the shared experiences and the peace and solace Noé found in all the places near and far, his community, out in the world, and then all at once leading him back to himself.

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# *futureescape*



## **The Light of the Dark**

**Sam Laporga**

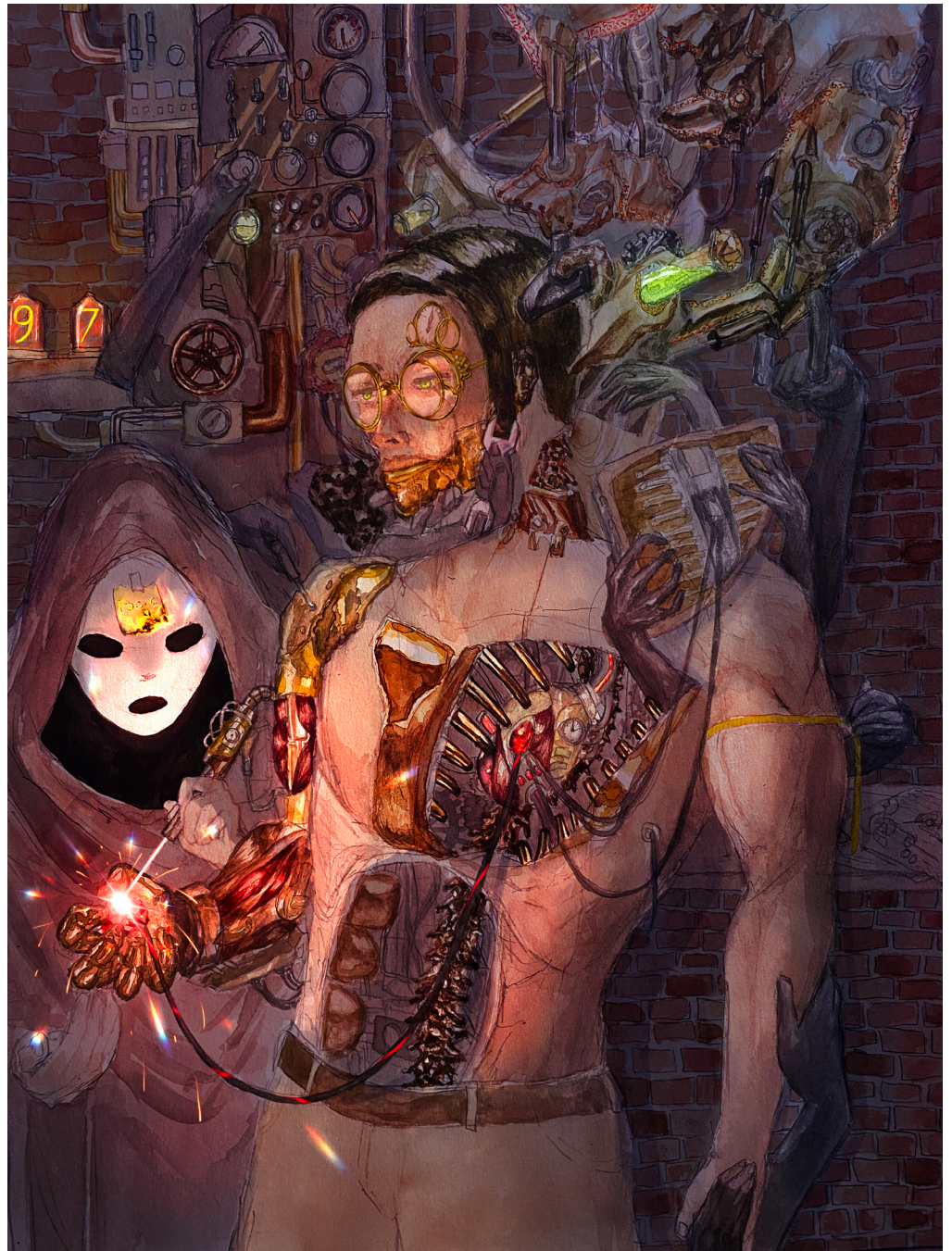
# Bones

Jade Worley

written in the marrow of my bones  
are the secrets of the universe.  
i am a keeper. my life is the key.  
but can it be, that thoughts  
like wicked weeds  
tarnish and tangle and tear  
into my skeleton  
like a boa constrictor's first prey.  
my mind is gelatin,  
the secrets seeping in and out  
from my skin, oh no,  
no, no, no, i can not be a vic-  
tim,  
I cannot be marred by constel-  
lations of fallen gods,  
I cannot fall victim, against all  
odds  
I need to breathe.

written in the marrow of my bones  
hiding, tail tucked between its  
legs,  
is the most monstrous thing,  
roots spreading,  
self-hate along my spine and implanted in my mind.  
it is a weight keeping me in bed  
locking bloodied chains on my legs, like lead  
I wish it chose you but i'm also glad it chose me instead,  
because

written in the marrow of my bones



ART: Maintenance Check by Shepard Baytan

I am a keeper. My life is the key.  
I am armed with a battalion of reasons to keep on going.  
and an arsenal of fears becomes  
reasons to keep on going  
I am a keeper of the secrets of the universe.  
the world is dark but my heart is glowing.

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# A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Paulene Angeli Cayao

Perseverance has always been a prominent theme in human history. It's such a seemingly fragile thing, merely an abstract thought, yet paradoxically also one of the strongest things we will ever know. Just how far are we willing to go for safety? For love? In the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, we follow the journey of a father and his child navigating a post-apocalyptic world full of ashes and despair. Though keeping a moral code seems pointless, the father and his child refuse to resort to a life of cannibalism and theft. They trudge forward through starving days and starless nights, all in the name of hoping to find solace in the South. This thought-provoking novel cleverly blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction through its use of vivid prose and selective details. Left nameless, the father and his child could easily be seen as you or I, making the impact of the novel all the more powerful. Through empty stomachs, overwhelming suffering, and even a life-threatening illness, the things that the father never let go of and kept very close to his heart until his death were his hope and his perseverance. It's this combination of hope and perseverance that I believe is vital to preventing a future like the one in McCarthy's novel. Without it, we're doomed to a world of ashes and despair.

To know the true value and role of hope and perseverance in our lives, we must first understand what it really is. "Hope is the thing with feathers" is a classic poem written by Emily Dickinson, a woman who is considered an important figure in American poetry by many. Dickinson portrays "hope" as a bird that "perches in the soul" (Dickinson, line 2), something that is inherently found in human beings. She also says that "sore must be the storm— / That could abash the little Bird" (Dickinson, lines 6-7), underlining the strong and tenacious nature of hope.

This portrayal of hope is shown in McCarthy's novel through the unceasing love the father has for his child and how it guides his actions. Through "washing a dead man's brains" (McCarthy 74) out of his child's hair and desperately trying to reassure him that they're "still the good guys" (McCarthy 77) despite desperate acts of violent self defense, it's in that unceasing love where hope and perseverance finds its source. Unceasing love ensures that perseverance will shine; it ensures that nothing will "abash" hope, even when there is seemingly no reason to hold onto it. The father, like many of us in our own lives, could have chosen to give up before the battle even started. As a matter of fact, the child's mother took the latter route. She kills herself with "a flake of obsidian. Sharper than steel" (McCarthy 58), leaving the father and the child to survive on their own in the hellish world, anxiously counting the "days to death" (McCarthy 133). The father not only trudges forward every day, but he also chooses to hang onto hope through every traumatic situation.

He continues to believe that there is still some sort of good left in this pollution-swept world, despite losing the love of his life and the mother of his only child. He is willing to do everything in his power to bring his beloved son to wherever comfort is found, not letting sights of "mummified death" or streets of "blowing ash" (McCarthy 24) get in his way. Taking a step beyond literature, I

believe that as long as we have unfaltering love for each other and the world around us, then it can be assured that hope and perseverance will thrive. And as long as hope and perseverance thrive, then it can be assured that the future will be bright.

Of course, it can be difficult to stay optimistic. However, *The Road* shows us that having never ending hope and perseverance ultimately pays off. After seemingly endless days of suffering on the road, the father and his child discovered a hidden, underground bunker filled with all the supplies they need, everything from canned goods to hygienic supplies to clean water. Before they came across this bunker, however, the father and his child found a home they thought was abandoned. Upon further inspection, they found a door leading to an underground room that contained "naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands" (McCarthy 110). Due to this traumatic event, the child developed a crippling, yet totally justified, fear of underground rooms. In turn, he was very apprehensive about the bunker and pleaded to his father: "Dont open it, Papa" (McCarthy 134). However, it's a good thing that the father reminded him that "[t]his is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (McCarthy 137).

Because of the man's perseverance and hope that the bunker contained good things inside, they ended up having full stomachs and a warm place to sleep for at least several nights; a well-deserved breather from the nightmare reality that they live in. Had the father not pushed to try, he and his son would have been subjected to more nights with empty stomachs and sleeping on the cold, hard ground. As *The Road* shows us, hope spreads as well as inspires. It also opens up the opportunity for healing. With the help of a little luck and a lot of perseverance, unbending optimism will eventually bring a fruitful future for not just ourselves but also for those who we love.

In addition to unbending optimism, direction is also important in preventing a future like the one in McCarthy's novel. "Goodbye to Tolerance" is a poem by Denise Levertov, an award-winning poet and proud humanist. The poem says goodbye to complacency, to "weak hearts, perfect pulses that never / falter: irresponsible / to nightmare reality" (Levertov, lines 18-20). The speaker of the poem condemns individuals who have been too tolerant when it comes to alarming societal issues, saying: "It is my brothers, my sisters, / whose blood spurts out and stops / forever / because you choose to believe it is not your business" (Levertov, lines 21-24). She urges us, the readers, to not be passive and to not turn our backs on the problems that surround us, hoping that they'll fix themselves. It's up to us to fix those problems, to fight for a sustainable future. In *The Road*, the world is past the point of saving; it's "[b]arren, silent, [and] godless" (McCarthy 4). Right now, in 2023, we still have time to steer away from that direction. With enough hope, perseverance, and strong-willed people looking in the right direction, a sustainable and flourishing future is a reality that is



just right around the corner.

Hope, perseverance, optimism, these powerful ideas can show up in the smallest of ways. Naomi Shihbab Nye, the daughter of a Palestinian father and writer of the poem “Yellow Glove” highlights the significance of seemingly small things in the grand world. The speaker of the poem talks about the journey of a lost glove. This pair of gloves “cost money” and the speaker’s family “didn’t have much” (Nye, line 8), putting into context how big of a deal losing that glove is. But “what can a yellow glove mean in a world of bankbooks and stereos” (Nye, line 22)? In *The Road*, little things such as a “treat” (McCarthy 23) of Coca-Cola, or a “can of peaches” that are drenched in “rich sweet syrup” (McCarthy 141) serve as tiny, yet significant, reminders that even in a world of death and anguish, good still exists. These

little things are “[p]art of the difference between floating and going down” (Nye, line 23). In our own lives, we can see that the little things in life give it meaning.

Think about the last time you got a good grade on an assignment, how fulfilling it felt, and how it motivated you to do better on the next assignment. Even effortless things like stopping to watch the sunset, smelling a sweet-looking flower, smiling back at a stranger, the smallest things in life can be the biggest reminders as to why it’s worth nourishing the hope and perseverance that is found inside us.

Of course, it’s important to recognize that life isn’t a Disney movie.

Where exactly does optimism stop and delusion begin? Audre Lorde, a proud civil rights activist and intersectional feminist, talks about a harsh truth that we must accept in her poem “A Litany for Survival.” The truth that perhaps “it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (Lorde, lines 42-44). The Earth has limited resources, and we aren’t immortal creatures. Just recently, a UN chief declared that we’re past the point of “global warming” and are now in the era of “global boiling” (Niranjan). It’s not simply a matter of achieving a “happily ever after;” and I see how it can be impractical to believe that the “good guys” (McCarthy 77) will triumph, because as we see in *The Road* and in real life, they don’t always. Countless wars,

modern imperialism, corrupt governments, an ever growing gap in the inequality of wealth, rising global temperatures, trying to survive in a “blackened jackstraw land” (McCarthy 190), it’s very easy to abandon hope when your environment doesn’t give you a reason to hold onto it. It’s very easy, and sometimes even preferable, to submit to the fact that we’re simply doomed. However, it’s actually because of all this negativity that we should cling onto hope and optimism more. It’s because of all this negativity that we should persevere; in the words of McCarthy, “[a]ll things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain” (McCarthy 54). We know what good looks like because we know what bad looks like so well. We shouldn’t be blinded by ideals, yes, but we shouldn’t be blinded by darkness

either. Optimism only bleeds into delusion when we don’t take the facts into consideration. In preventing a future like the one in *The Road*, it’s really about believing that we can have a sustainable future and fighting for it despite the hopelessness that surrounds us. A self-fulfilling prophecy; we’re only doomed when we believe we are.

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ART: Inside Out by Nicholas Drisdell

# Proxying at the CADEM Endorsing Convention

Drew M. Lobo

The way most people get into the California Democratic Party State Endorsing Convention in Sacramento is by being an elected or appointed member of the Democratic State Central Committee delegation. Until probably two weeks ago, I didn't know this convention was taking place. I'm neither elected nor appointed, and I don't particularly want any of the responsibility that comes with either of those words. But who doesn't want to go to a convention, right? As it turned out, there was an easier way in. That's where the journey begins. Here's some background: I'm a member of the Peninsula chapter of the DSA (Democratic Socialists of America), though maybe not an especially ambitious or active one. But when a guy by the name of James messaged the group asking if anyone would want to attend as a proxy delegate, I did something a little bit out of character—I signed up. My intentions were a little bit self-serving, but that's what politics is about—I'd fit right in. Mostly, I figured it would be an educational experience, but I was also told there would be food provided. When I left at around 11:10 a.m. on Friday, I brought two things to eat: a box of Triscuits and a Thermos full of unfrozen chili I'd made a few weeks ago. I was really looking forward to that free food.

I hadn't really counted on Sacramento being so big and sprawling. As a matter of fact, I'd only been once, in high school. My motel was about 20 minutes out from the convention center, not accounting for wrong turns; I checked in, and realized it would probably be in my best interest to charge my phone for a little bit (I'd have to charge it again later that night. Buying phones off eBay is pretty hit-or-miss). It was about 5:00 p.m. when I arrived at the convention center, and although the security was pretty legit, the bag-check line was more-or-less painless. I'd only brought my paperwork, a clipboard to hold it, and a notebook, just in case. It was time to hurry up and wait: the line for proxy credentialing was a lot longer, and it was moving at a snail's pace. In line, I met a guy named Matt, who had flown in from New York as an exhibitor for a hosting service for electoral campaign websites. It turned out that Matt was in the wrong line; luckily, I wasn't, and eventually I got to present my paperwork to, hopefully, receive my credentials. Coincidentally, Margaret—who called me over to the table—was the same committee member who'd been helping me with my forms over email; I was in good hands, but I still started sweating. I was told the process wouldn't be too interrogative, but why, I asked myself, was it taking so long? Naturally, there were a few issues; the credentialing committee chair had to sign some forms to get me in. But, after all that, I got in, and I got a swag bag for all my trouble containing a lanyard for my credentials among miscellaneous trinkets. I was a free man now, and my badge declared me to be John (who I was proxying for) above an orange strip reading "proxy."

The question was, what now? I was told I'd prob-

ably want to attend the Progressive Caucus session that was set for around 7:00 p.m., but it hadn't started yet. I didn't have much to do in the meantime but wait, so that's what I did. For the early birds, the meeting's organizers had put out some of the free food I was hoping for; it was pretty good, but there wasn't all that much to go around.

I can't do the subject justice by putting it into writing; a lot of people have tried. The topic of the Israeli military's carpet bombing of Palestinian civilian centers is something I hope nobody in the room wanted to avoid; I didn't take any notes in this session, but I'm confident in one thing: the Jewish and Arab people who spoke that night recognized that, if this was ever a war, it isn't anymore. It is "extreme revenge", as one speaker put it. I won't make any attempt at neutrality here, because that isn't what the Palestinian people deserve. Neutrality is a lie. The destruction suffered by Gaza, and the mass killings of little children by the United States' greatest ally in the Middle East, are on a scale that none of us can easily comprehend. That doesn't mean it's not worth it to try. From here, I went about the rest of my night. The Democrats for Israel caucus was set to meet the following night at 7:00 p.m.

I attended a few events, but so far there was only one guy I knew at the convention, whom I had no luck finding. I could have branched out and met some people, but I'm not much of a fan of networking.

I wasn't there for the festivities; the main reason I was there was to endorse a candidate to represent California in the U.S. Senate. The general sessions would stretch through tomorrow morning and afternoon, and the voting period would begin at four o'clock. I also had a ticket to a lunch event for San Mateo County Democratic Party members.

I wasn't particularly interested in the first general session. I showed up a little late, and I didn't know who most of the speakers were. Justin, San Mateo County's other proxy who I knew from my DSA chapter, was there, along with a couple of figures in local politics; I won't namedrop, mostly because (no offense to them) I sort of forget what they do. The four of us left the session early, since the lunch was planned for 11:30. What I didn't count on is that complimentary drink tickets came with the lunch, so take what happens in the next two or three hours with a grain of salt. Among less serious side effects, the medication I was prescribed recently makes day drinking pretty unenjoyable, and I was in a little bit of a haze for a good chunk of the day. That was a lesson learned.

I met James here, though. What I didn't know until then was that Councilman James Coleman is set to be the mayor of South San Francisco by the end of this year, which I thought was pretty cool (before then, I'll admit I thought he was just some guy, more or less). There were some other recognizable names at this lunch, State Senator Scott Wiener for one. This all could have been an opportunity to meet some people and get some business cards, if I was feeling more outgoing, but I decided I didn't mind just taking in the atmosphere. Eventually, a little before two, I figured I'd go catch the second general session. This one I cared about: the Senate candidates would be speaking. I planned to vote for Barbara Lee, the only member of Congress to have voted against the Iraq War and the only candidate in the race to support a ceasefire in Palestine.

There were a lot of fans of Lee in the building. Katie Porter and Adam Schiff were each interviewed on stage, and as each made their closing statements, a chant rang out: "ceasefire now." Each time, a man took the microphone and said something to the effect of "Every candidate deserves to be heard" to some amount of applause. Each time, a look came over the target's face that was hard to identify. It might have been surprise, it might have been simple annoyance, and there might have even been a touch of dismay in there.

While this was happening, a sit-in was taking place outside the room. There was a rally planned for three o'clock that Justin and I and some of the other delegates planned to attend. We got there around three, an hour before voting opened up, and stood by the road with our signs and lanyards. A lot of the people driving by would give us a few honks of support as the crowd grew; a man on horseback holding a Palestinian flag and wearing the traditional Arab keffiyeh stood guard. The voting period came quick—voting through a link emailed to each of us was encouraged, but I never received the email; I had to go back to the convention center to vote in person.

The line moved fast, and voting was pretty straightforward. Could have gone worse, I thought to myself as I sat down to charge my phone for a while. Eventually, Justin texted me—the march had started. I made my way downstairs to meet up with him. Security blocked off the side exits, on account of the protest, so I had to go out the long way. It didn't take too long to find the rest of the group; I just had to look for the police detail.

The man and the horse led the march. Following with him were us, the marchers along with a group in a Ford or Chevy or GMC or Toyota truck that drifted among the crowd. The truck was equipped with a canopy and speakers, and from the truck bed a man led the crowd in chants. Ceasefire now. It was getting dark, and it took me a while to find Justin in the wave of humanity and signs and flags. Realistically, the big names in the building were probably pretty unfazed by the protest. Well-insulated from sound, the convention center—and the convention experience in general—always seemed strangely isolated from the rest of the world. Still, we made our way around the building a few times before, eventually, coming to a halt in front of the main entrance. We stayed there for a while, continuing in our chants.

This is about where something strange happened. If the way I was told about it later is true, a security guard left a side door unlocked. Somebody got in and unlocked a few more doors. There wasn't a lot security could do to stop the crowd that followed. This is how the barrier that the convention had created for itself was permeated.

At first, the crowd inside the building was somewhat small, but it soon became considerable. Viewed from the outside of the building, the number of people who had gathered in the lobby or had brought their flags up the escalator to the second floor was a striking thing to see. Soon, the Democrats for Israel caucus would be canceled along

with every other caucus scheduled for the night.

Out of curiosity, and for a chance to sit down for a while, I went back inside the center, handing my sign off to someone else (as a proxy delegate, I didn't want to do anything that'd look bad. Delegates weren't supposed to have unauthorized political materials in the building). The halls were cleared out; there were a few delegates sitting or standing around, but there was little for them to do but wait around and kill time between now and the various offsite events that were planned later in the night. One woman I talked to for a minute muttered something under her breath about terrorists, glancing over at the protesters; I don't know if she was talking about them or about the people getting bombed. The protest continued. I was getting tired, and I figured I'd leave them to it. I met back up with Justin, who informed me that James had invited us to a dinner hosted by the United Association (The local plumbers' and pipefitters' union). So my night didn't end on a note of drumbeats or righteous anger or red-and-blue flashing lights; it ended with a complimentary plate of rice, beans and carne asada.

I appreciated the food, but the highlight of this event—naturally—was the politics. The group helped their friend pick out a caption for her Instagram post, featuring her and her crew: "The future of San Mateo County." They scoffed at their rivals' posts. Some time in the last couple days, I'd heard San Francisco politics described with a metaphor that stuck with me: a knife fight in a phone booth. There's no love lost between adversaries in the local scene. When I mentioned that I'd been planning on interviewing for an internship with one of those rivals, though—a "mean girl" as far as their circle was concerned—they were all for it, if for no other reason than that it'd be a great way to get some experience.

The results of the senate endorsement vote came in, and we sat with anticipation as James began to read them off. Katie Porter only got 16 percent of the vote, which came as a surprise to most of us. Next was Adam Schiff, and his 40-odd percent of the vote wasn't surprising at all. Schiff and Porter were leading in the polls by a comfortable margin. Which is why, when James got to Barbara Lee, we were all paying attention. James told us that Lee had beat Schiff by 30 votes.

Who really won despite coming in with only 2.15 percent is No Endorsement, because that's essentially what this means. 60% of the vote is needed to secure an official endorsement. That means that this wasn't a huge victory, but it was a victory regardless.

I'm not writing this as a pro bono endorsement of Barbara Lee; do your own research and vote for who you want. That's not the point of this story. It's hard to write about politics without writing about the politicians, and it's hard to write about my experiences without writing about the feelings that come with them. We all really did see this as a win, though, and I the author am no exception. I cheered with the rest of them, and I reached over to fistbump James. The feeling was a little bit surreal; I'd been dog tired most of the night, but if anything would wake me up this might be it. If nothing else, this would level the playing field a little bit. I sent an email to John (the guy who's stead I was in here, who was currently in Hawaii) to keep him in the loop. The next day, he'd reply with "Bring on the wheelbarrows of cash from special interests!" You can't play the game without appealing to the special interests a little bit. Some call it realism, some call it selling your soul, but either way, it's a part of the democratic process.

Eventually, most of the group decided to move on to greater things. There was a party planned at the Sheraton Hotel by the convention center. I had originally planned to go, but I was getting tired enough that it's fair to say I didn't have it in me. Justin and I were still there, as was Alex, a politician from Justin's hometown whom Justin had been meaning to ask for some advice. So I listened to what he had to say, and I understood some of it. Alex had a knack for speaking that looked like some sort of gift but was, more likely, honed with years in the political field. If nothing else, it was interesting to hear them talk; I tried to get a few thoughts into the conversation, but I realized pretty quickly that there was a lot more nuance to this particular dialogue than I was aware of going in.

We parted ways with Alex eventually. There wasn't all that much to do after that. I dropped Justin off at the house he was crashing at; he'd get on the road later that night and get back home a little after midnight. I realized now that I didn't strictly have to stay another night in my motel, since there weren't any big events planned for the next day. Still, I'd already paid for it, so why not make use of the amenities? I preferred not to make the drive in

the middle of the night. I'd plan on an early start tomorrow. As planned, I left the Super 8 a little after 7:00 a.m. on Sunday and I got home a little after nine, earlier than my parents expected me to be back.

I don't doubt that I got something out of this experience. What I'm not so clear on is what exactly that is. The whole experience might be described as weird more than anything; I had some fun, don't get me wrong, but the point still stands. There's definitely something a little weird about me, a guy without a lot of experience or know-how to speak of, being assigned to travel to the state's capitol for a pretty-exclusive three-day convention with the extremely-singular official purpose of casting a vote via email link. It was weird how the convention formed its own little bubble, and it was weird how approachable everyone seemed once I got my credentials despite the various high-profile figures at the event (most of whom I wouldn't immediately recognize). The events of Saturday night, which would go on to make national news, were unprecedented at this particular event as far as I know—it felt significant at the time, and it still does.

And you know what, that's all I have to say about it. It'd be fair to say that it was educational, and maybe in a few ways that I didn't anticipate. At the end of the day, I'm glad I did it, even though I'm not entirely sure what to make of the whole thing.



ART: Yara by Shepard Baytan

# What is CRISPR?

## Gene Editing's Role in Medicine

Jacob Stattenfield

### INTRODUCTION

Gene editing has harnessed revolutionary new biotechnological tools to significantly impact diagnostics, gene therapy, agriculture, and more. Since the discovery of gene-editing technologies in the late twentieth century, scientists have accomplished various feats with gene-editing techniques. The applications are exciting and seemingly limitless, from editing the DNA of mosquitos to reduce the spread of Malaria (Stein, 2021) to creating genetically improved agriculture (Zaidi, 2020).

While information about CRISPR is abundant, explanations about the biology behind DNA modification techniques are often either simplified for general audiences or incredibly complicated and meant for molecular biologists. Truly understanding how and why CRISPR works on a biological level is complex, and I sought an explanation that would be both in-depth and all-encompassing in a way that anybody could understand. New acronyms, vocabulary unique to gene modification, and the disconnect between in-lab experiments and written conclusions induce numerous questions. What makes up a chromosome? How does the Cas9 protein function? How does CRISPR get applied in a lab? These questions propelled my research and led me to create a complete description of how and why CRISPR works, written in a way that anybody can understand, regardless of prior knowledge of biology.

Understanding how CRISPR functions is fascinating, yet one of the most exciting components of the technology is the ethical debate surrounding its use in human medicine. Many are concerned by ethics, safety, and economic questions surrounding CRISPR.

There is no denying that there are risks and drawbacks associated with gene editing. However, there are many benefits to exploring methods to cure monogenic diseases in humans; increased knowledge about the use of CRISPR can lead to further medical discoveries, improve the quality of millions of lives, and expand the medical options of parents who want children but do not want to pass on their disease. The debate between scientists is captivating and ever-evolving, and as the scientific community develops experience utilizing CRISPR technologies, the prospect of the safe and successful use of gene editing on humans appears not just likely, but inevitable.

### *What is CRISPR and how does it work?*

Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats were initially discovered in 1987 when scientists were examining the DNA of *E. coli* and noticed repeated sequences of nucleotides within the bacteria cell's genome. These sequences of DNA were typically between 20 and 50 base pairs long and housed unique "spacer" sequences of DNA between them. For over a decade, scientists were unclear about the purpose of this system; however, in the early 2000s, scientists discovered the natural function of these CRISPR systems – As a bacteria's "immune system."

Scientists examined the DNA within the spacers and discovered that it matched the DNA of viruses. This discovery led to the hypothesis that the CRISPR system functioned as an immune system for bacteria (Figure 5). Viruses attacking the *E. coli* cell would insert their own DNA into the cell, DNA which would replicate, infect, and kill the cell if unimpeded. The purpose of the CRISPR system within bacteria is to destroy incoming infections as

well as imbed them in the DNA of the cell in order to be able to fight them in the future. The CRISPR system has many parts: CRISPR Associated genes, or Cas genes for short, as well as the CRISPRs and spacers that record the history of previous infections.

The Cas genes encode proteins, which unravel DNA and cut it at the desired location. These helicase and nuclease proteins serve to unwind and cut DNA, respectively. They attack incoming viral DNA sequences, working for the cell to defeat incoming bacteriophage DNA. Furthermore, the attacking sequence's DNA would be cut, and an identical sequence would be added to the *E. coli*'s genome for every new viral infection, giving the cell a greater ability to recognize and fight the infection in the future.

Through the bacteria cell's "immune system," scientists Dr. Jennifer Doudna and Dr. Emmanuelle Charpentier recognized an opportunity to use living cells' existing tools to make modifications to the genome (Jinek, 2012). Many CRISPR Associated (Cas) genes have been discovered, the most popular being the Cas9 gene. Cas9 is a nuclease protein that cleaves the DNA sequence. Guide RNA (gRNA) is a section of RNA that unravels and tests where it can attach to the DNA sequence to find a matching nucleotide sequence. When put together, the Cas9 and gRNA function to locate the matching genomic sequence and make a cut. By doing so, the bacteria cell's Cas genes create proteins that allow it to locate and cut invading bacteriophage infections and add the bacteriophage's DNA to its own DNA to more effectively detect and destroy the infection in the future (Figure 6). Scientists are able to adapt these existing tools discovered within living cells to make accurate cuts in the DNA and edit nucleotide sequences.

Successful DNA edits also rely upon homologous repair, the cell's mechanism for repairing DNA breaks. In nature, homologous repair occurs when a section of DNA is damaged or cleaved in one of the sister chromatids, causing the DNA to use the neighboring sister chromatid's DNA sequence as a reference for how to repair its own DNA (Thacker, 2017). Scientists can use this repair method to input their desired repair sequence by including an engineered repair template alongside the Cas9 protein, gRNA(s), and other necessary components. Once Cas9 cuts the DNA at the sequence of interest, the cell will use the scientist's injected repair template as a reference to rebuilding its DNA rather than looking to the sister chromatid (Patrick, 2023)(Figure 7).

The end product is a CRISPR system that uses existing tools within a cell and repurposes them to allow scientists to add, edit, or remove specific DNA sequences more accurately and effectively than ever before.

### *My In-Lab Experiment with CRISPR*

During my research, I got the incredible opportunity to work with CRISPR in-lab at the Beckman Center for Molecular and Genetic Medicine at Stanford University under the guidance of molecular biologist Dr. Celja Uebel. We used CRISPR to conduct an experiment to better understand the function of a protein of interest. Doing so taught me about the in-lab process of gene editing and contextualized how CRISPR can and has been used in science. In our experiment, we used CRISPR as a tool to remove a section of DNA encoding for a protein called COSA-1 in *C. elegans*. *C. elegans* is a microscopic and transparent roundworm commonly used as a

model organism. They are often used to study meiosis, a specialized cell division program that allows organisms to make sperm and eggs for successful sexual reproduction. *C. elegans* are hermaphrodites, meaning each organism contains both male and female sex gametes (sperm and eggs), allowing them to reproduce independently, making them a useful model organism for the study of meiosis.

After microinjecting our CRISPR injection mix into the gonads of our *C. elegans* on an injection microscope, we selected for offspring that incorporated our edits, thus creating a new genetic strain of *C. elegans* ( $\Delta$ IDR). Using Dapi Staining, a method of visualizing the DNA in our organism, we looked at the oocytes (unfertilized eggs) inside of the  $\Delta$ IDR COSA-1 *C. elegans*. To determine whether or not the  $\Delta$ IDR COSA-1 protein was functional in promoting COs, we looked to see whether our CRISPR-edited oocytes had six connected or twelve unconnected chromosomes. The oocytes had six connected chromosomes, failing to support our hypothesis that the IDR of COSA-1 is important for COSA-1 function.

Over the course of my in-lab experience, my understanding of CRISPR and its real-world applications was multiplied tenfold. A remarkable amount of time and effort goes towards each scientific study, as the process of testing and verifying is thorough. By conducting experiments in the lab, I learned about the meticulous experimental process, developed hands-on lab skills, and gained insight through the questions that arose while working closely with an expert in the field – Dr. Celja Uebel. While our experiment led to a negative result – one that allowed us to reject our hypothesis – I learned how scientists conduct experiments to inquire about the function of a given protein. Ultimately, we contributed to research on the genome of *C. elegans*, an indispensable model organism for the scientific community.

### ***The Ethics of Utilizing Gene-Editing Technologies to Cure Monogenic Diseases***

Debates surrounding the ethics of human gene modification as a solution to monogenic diseases are complicated and multifaceted. Numerous risks and dangers call into question CRISPR's role in medicine. Since its discovery, scientists have emphasized the safe and responsible use of CRISPR technologies; strict regulations exist in the United States regarding the use of CRISPR on humans, including the outright ban on the use of CRISPR gene editing on viable embryos (Curran, 2023). However, as knowledge about gene editing has evolved, so has the conversation within the scientific community about the responsible use of CRISPR technologies.

For use on human patients with monogenic diseases, CRISPR injections would need to be administered before embryonic development to affect all cells – an injection on a living adult, for example, would only affect the cells in the injection area. To modify all cells within a mammalian organism, studies have shown success in editing mice using an injection of CRISPR while the embryo is in its one-cell stage (Harms, 2014). Furthermore, experiments on non-viable human embryos are common. They are used to broaden scientists' understanding of CRISPR's potential uses and the risks of genetically editing human embryos, such as using CRISPR to attempt to remove a mutation that causes blindness in non-viable human embryos (Zuccaro, 2020). For any future use of CRISPR in medicine, the most likely application appears to be using in vitro fertilization in conjunction with CRISPR to modify fertilized embryos in an early stage in order to ensure that every cell in the patient's body receives the desired edit.

Such an unknown and complicated procedure involving editing a viable human embryo requires the utmost caution and safety, the latter of which is impossible without further knowledge about the dangers of using CRISPR on human embryos. The most alarming example of CRISPR misuse came to light in November 2018

at the Second International Summit on Human Genome Editing, a conference of hundreds of doctors, scientists, patients, and experts. Chinese Scientist He Jiankui claimed he had successfully modified the CCR5 gene in 2 twin babies in an effort to make them immune to HIV (Raposo, 2019). The scientific community condemned his actions because the lack of knowledge about CRISPR's effects made the experiment extremely dangerous. Experts at the time lacked experience utilizing CRISPR on human embryos, meaning there was no method of predicting whether or not unwanted edits would be present, edits that could lead to detrimental phenotype changes that can affect the life and well-being of patients. Moreover, Jiankui presented his work as though he had successfully edited the genome of two human patients at high risk for inheriting HIV, however, outside examination concluded that the babies he experimented on were not at risk for inheriting HIV, making the operation preventative rather than curative. The scientific consensus following Jiankui's immoral experiment was that years of experience and knowledge about the risks of using CRISPR on human germline cells were needed to safely employ gene editing on human patients.

In addition to the debate surrounding the unsuccessful or dangerous downsides of CRISPR, many scientists voiced their opinions about the risks of successfully genetically modifying human patients. Since the discovery of CRISPR, worries have arisen about the responsible use of the seemingly futuristic technology. While a Gattaca-style dystopian use of CRISPR (genetic engineering of a race of "genetically superior" humans) appears unlikely in the face of all current regulations, the concern is valid. Marcy Darnovsky, head of the Center for Genetics and Society in San Francisco, voiced her concern on the issue: "If we were to allow parents to genetically modify their children, we would be creating new groups of people who are different from each other biologically and some would have been modified in ways that are supposed to enhance them. And they would be — unfortunately I think — considered an enhanced race — a better group of people. And I think that could really just super-charge the inequities we already have in our world."

Finally, while other risks involve the unsuccessful or improper uses of gene editing, some ask whether or not the technology — if used successfully and for good purposes — is worth pursuing at all. Many expensive medical procedures face scrutiny for lacking equity because they are not available to people of all socioeconomic groups, and CRISPR would be no different. Genetically modifying a viable human embryo would carry the costs of already expensive in vitro fertilization, as well as the expenses of CRISPR modifications. Forbes Health's Marissa Conrad estimated the cost of in vitro fertilization, "A single IVF cycle—defined as ovarian stimulation, egg retrieval and embryo transfer—can range from \$15,000 to \$30,000," a price that is already highly expensive without accounting for the yet unknown price of CRISPR injections (Conrad, 2023). These modifications would be incredibly costly and, some experts say, may exacerbate imbalances between economic groups, as wealthier patients may have greater access to the technology.

On the other hand, many benefits exist for CRISPR, and its promising future encourages many in the scientific and medical communities to attempt to overcome the dangers through extensive research and experimentation. The primary outcome of targeting disease-causing gene mutations is the goal of preventing the inheritance of monogenic diseases for future generations. The ability to eliminate a disease within one offspring allows not only for the prevention of the disease in the patient but also opens the door to completely eradicating monogenic diseases: "Germline gene editing would result in an embryo in which every cell is free of the disease-causing mutation, including its gametes, to prevent the disease from being passed on to subsequent generations. Over multiple gen-

erations, germline editing could reduce disease prevalence in the human gene pool, and eventually even eradicate certain heritable diseases from the human population" (Kofler, 2018). Giving parents with monogenic diseases the ability to have children without their disease can make a significant difference in combating monogenic diseases because this issue is compounding from generation to generation; every child born with a monogenic disease may go on to have multiple children of their own – passing on their disease. For every cured patient, the number of descendants they can have over multiple generations is enormous, as their CRISPR-edited DNA can be passed on to tens or even hundreds of healthy descendants over many generations.

In addition to focusing on monogenic diseases, an effort to make CRISPR technologies more safe and effective can lead to other advancements in medicine and other industries. In other medical areas, CRISPR is also being used on adult patients, such as editing T-cells to improve T-cell therapy for cancer patients (Dimitri, 2022). The aforementioned study to reduce the spread of malaria by mutating mosquitos carry a gene that makes their mouth deformed – and therefore incapable of biting – represents developments in CRISPR's ability to creatively impact health worldwide (Stein, 2021). Finally, CRISPR has also been studied with the goal of creating more environmentally friendly biofuels (Nagaraju, 2016).

Another benefit of utilizing CRISPR to cure monogenic diseases is that it gives prospective parents with monogenic diseases more choices. Parents with monogenic diseases currently have no entirely successful method to achieve two goals simultaneously: Maintaining genetic parentage and preventing the transmission of their heritable disease. Refraining from becoming a parent, adopting, and purchasing or using outside gametes are options that prevent the transmission of heritable diseases; however, they fail to maintain genetic parentage. In vitro fertilization with preimplantation genetic diagnosis (IVF with PGD), an option that involves producing multiple embryos through in vitro and implanting a "desired" disease-free embryo, allows for genetic parentage but is not effective in every case and carries the ethical issues involved with discarding unused embryos. No existing option has provided parents with a monogenic disease with the ability to maintain genetic parentage and prevent the transmission of the heritable disease. However, CRISPR technologies may be able to accomplish both: "In the future, CRISPR gene editing could provide a new option to prevent heritable disease transmission, while still enabling intended parents to have a genetic connection to their offspring." (Kofler, 2018).

Through advancements in CRISPR to cure monogenic diseases, tools, and techniques that can positively impact other projects, fields, and industries become possible. The numerous CRISPR breakthroughs were propelled by a collaborative effort by the scientific community to research and investigate CRISPR's uses. Because prior research has led to such incredible breakthroughs, it is probable that further research can lead to more technological breakthroughs that can further benefit medicine, health, agriculture, bioenergy, and more. With each CRISPR milestone attained, the scientific community nears the immense potential to eradicate monogenic diseases and pushes the boundaries of what was thought possible in medicine, health, agriculture, bioenergy, and beyond.

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